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Reappropriating Empire: A Study of the West African Students' Union (1925-1960)

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**Reappropriating Empire:
A Study of the West African Students' Union
(1925-1960)**

**A senior honors thesis submitted to the History Department of the
University of Colorado by Phoebe Flanigan in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.**

**Presented to:
Myles Osborne, PhD History (Primary Adviser)
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No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded—you may be ignored—but your personhood cannot be denied. In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement... once as stranger, then as friend.¹



I wish to extend my gratitude to the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder for generously funding my research. I would also like to thank my adviser, Dr. Myles Osborne, for inspiring and encouraging this project—Thank you for consistently setting the bar high and pushing me to explore my potential. Finally, thank you to Hakim Adi for patiently and amicably fielding my queries about the WASU; to Fateh and Karta Singh for sharing your home and your hearts with me while I was pursuing my research in London; and to John Courtney, for being a loving haolu throughout this difficult and rewarding process.

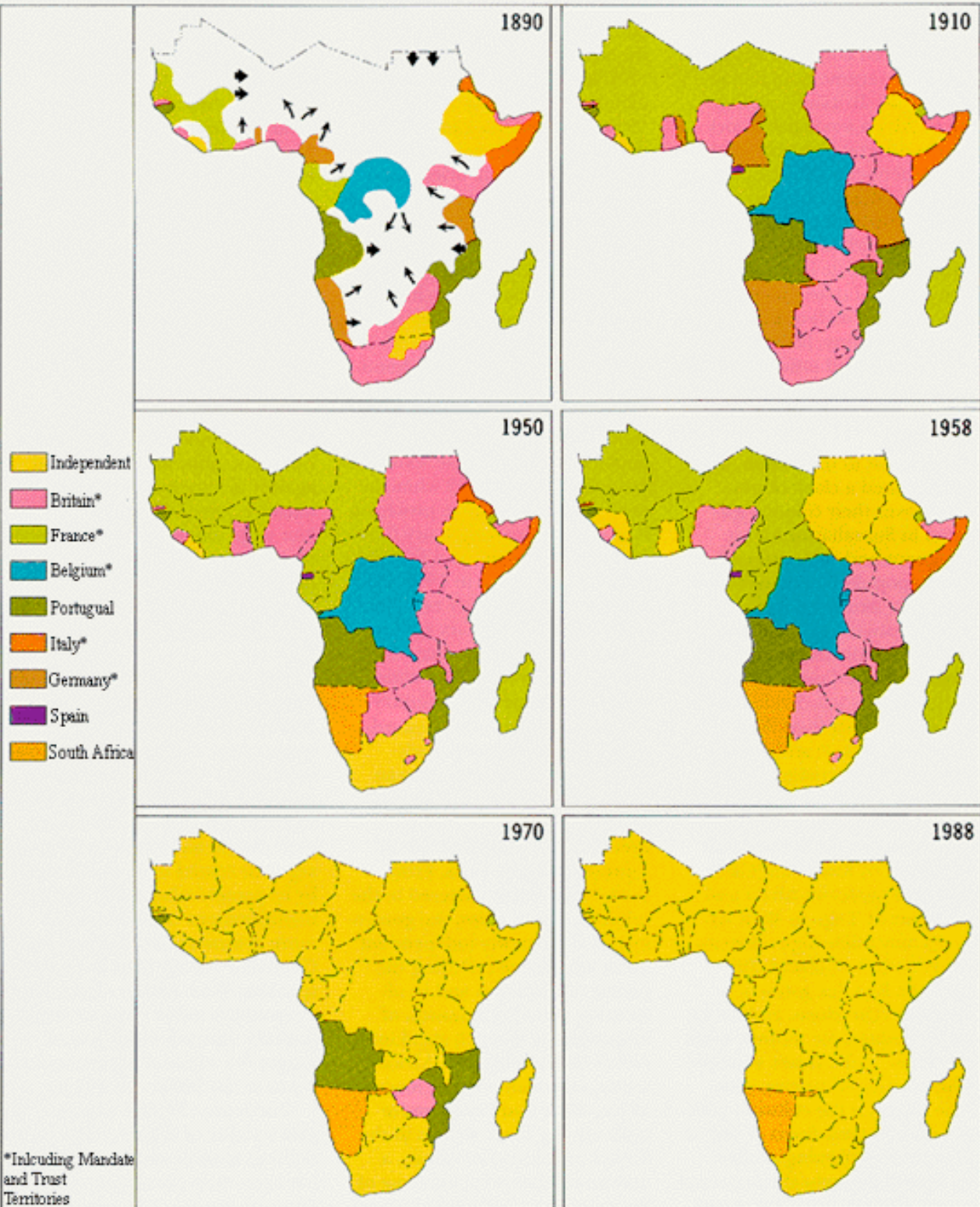
¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xxv.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how and why students of the West African Students' Union “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” the same signs and symbols that justified the expansion of the Euro-Christian colonial paradigm in order to paradoxically maximize their sociopolitical power and erode the colonial system.² It focuses specifically on students' reappropriation of Christianity, civilization and commerce—or ‘the Three C’s’—between 1925 and 1960.

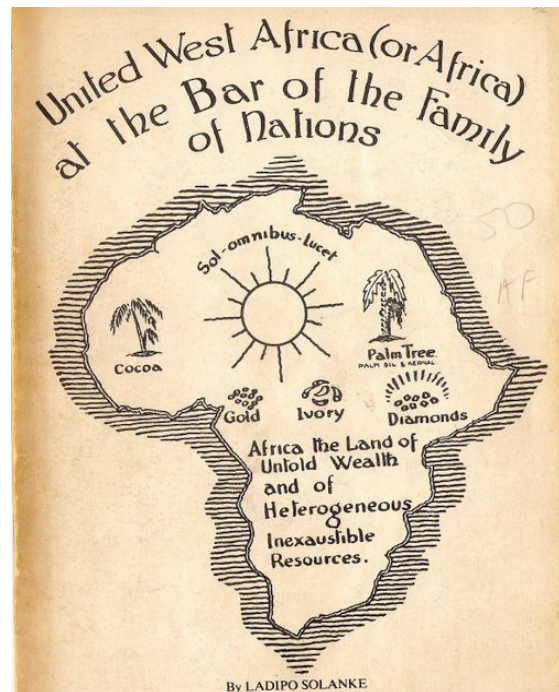
² *Ibid.*, 55.

COLONIZATION AND LIBERATION



ABOVE: Maps of colonial Africa across time.

Image courtesy of the University of Vermont (http://www.uvm.edu/rsenr/rm230/africa_colonies.gif).



TOP: members of the WASU gather for a social event; BOTTOM LEFT: WASU founder, Ladipo Solanke; BOTTOM RIGHT: Pamphlet produced at a WASU Conference.

Images courtesy of the WASU Project Facebook Page.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, notable numbers of African students—including those West Africans who would, in 1925, form the West African Students' Union (WASU)—began to emigrate from their homelands at the periphery of the colonial power structure to the British center of economic and political affairs. Despite the liberal rhetoric of the colonial education system, students who reached the London metropolis found themselves the designated inferior, racially and culturally, within a Eurocentric social hierarchy. Culturally uprooted and structurally marginalized, African diasporics in Britain sat “astride at least two cultural identity positions without being tied unproblematically to either.”³

In March of 1945, two decades and a World War after the actual founding of the WASU, a member of the student magazine's editorial team published a piece describing the duties and anxieties inherent to this intercultural space:

The life of an average student is supposed to be one of a happy-go-lucky irresponsibility. Not so that of a West African student whom circumstances have tricked into placing his destiny under the absolute control of an external foreign power. As soon as a West African student sets his foot on the soil of England, he is willy-nilly forced into the position of assuming the rôle of what might be termed an ‘introvert-controvert’. He must, if he has any national pride at all, defend, without being bitter, the sanctity, integrity and honour of his native country and her ancient institutions against the onslaught of pseudo-scientists and self-appointed colonial experts, whose pens are being devoted towards driving a wedge between Great Britain and the peoples of West Africa.

The perpetuation of the colonial status—a system of herrenvolk, of superiors and inferiors—has become with such experts a lucrative source of livelihood. To them also the possession of second-hand information on Africa is a passport to glory, and entitles them to move in that section of English society which is separated by economic parasitism from the common mass.

³ Samir Dayal, “Diaspora and Double Consciousness,” *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 29 (1996): 52.

A West African student abroad almost instinctively, therefore, assumes as a duty a dual capacity. As a merchant of light in search of the golden fleece, he becomes at once a student of his own special field of study and an interpreter of West Africa to Britain and America. A most delicate and difficult undertaking such as that calls for the wisdom of Solomon and the energy of Samson. An ambassador of goodwill, he is expected also to interpret British life and culture to his people in West Africa. He is thus the real living link between the two peoples. His responsibilities are particularly heavy. His views are given weight; and sometimes form the subject of the most serious consideration on both sides of the Atlantic, even by the cynics. His behaviour and particular idiosyncrasies; his gait, whether slovenly or smart; his manner of speech, whether natural or affected with a superimposed complexity; even his reaction to the fair sex; all are meticulously scrutinized by those around him, and frequently form the stock-in-trade of the common people. Africans being usually considered *en masse*, and seldom as individuals, his failing in these respects reflect discredit on the peoples of West Africa.

Then, too, there is the psychological factor. It is not often realised that West Africans in Britain are living in the midst of (if the truth must be told) an indifferent and, in many respects, unfriendly people who regard them, quite logically, as aliens, and, not so logically, as inferior rivals. English people have been consciously educated, if we may say so with respect, to look upon Africans as inferior with whom they should not associate except in so far as association will result in their material benefit. And what is more, some educated Africans have also fallen victim to this cleverly systematized and executed propaganda. The result is not a happy one. English people and West Africans are now at arm's length. Under such circumstance, it is more of a miracle that Africans do achieve academic successes in British Universities and other Institutions.

Thus the life of a West African student differs considerably from that of an average English student, whose main objects in life as a student consist in taking a lively interest in sport, in meeting celebrities, in taking part in general social and educative activities, and in passing examinations.⁴

Here, then, was the crisis of the colonial West African student in London. Unlike his 'happy-go-lucky' English peers, he was burdened not only by his studies but also by the responsibility, the stress born of his intercultural positioning.⁵ He became a

⁴ *Wasu* 7:1, March 1945, 3.

⁵ Until the late 1940s and early 1950s, West African students in the metropole were almost exclusively male.

translator, defending his racial ability and his national heritage as he dissolved the unspoken boundaries that restricted him from true communion with his white-skinned classmates. He was the subject of constant scrutiny, a representative in deed and word of ‘the African’ as made singular by the hostile gaze of British society. Franz Fanon describes the consequent obligation, acutely felt, “to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.”⁶ Conversely, the West African student in London assumed tacit responsibility for translating the realities of British life and culture to his friends and family at home. This, too, brought on a sense of unbelonging and alienation. As Fanon again explains, “The educated Negro, slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him. Or that he no longer understand it.”⁷ In this sense, the West African student in London was dually estranged—a link, a living bridge between nations, but never totally at home in one paradigm or the other.

And yet, as a close reading of this passage illustrates, West African students were able to manipulate this dual estrangement to their advantage. Rather than caving beneath the pressures of the intercultural space, West African students in London used their in-between positioning to form collectivities directed at interrogating and dislocating central tenets of colonialism. Within the space of a handful of paragraphs, the editor quoted above successfully reappropriates key notions of the colonial paradigm—notably Christianity, civilization and commerce—such that he simultaneously validates the struggle of West African students and undermines the legitimacy of colonial rule. Though epitomized in this particular passage, the subversive reappropriation of the signs

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

and symbols most central to Euro-Christian colonial power resonated throughout the life of the WASU and often shaped the rhetorical forms that their responses to colonialism took.

This thesis unpacks that dynamic. It analyzes how and why students of the West African Students' Union "appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" the same signs and symbols that justified the expansion of the Euro-Christian colonial paradigm in order to paradoxically maximize their sociopolitical power and erode the colonial system.⁸ It focuses, specifically, on students' reappropriation of Christianity, civilization and commerce—or the Three C's—between 1925 and 1960.

Discord and Possibility at the Boundaries of Culture

A sense of dual alienation has long played a role in defining the lived experiences of Africans throughout the diaspora, and academics and laymen alike have written volumes documenting its effects. The American Pan-Africanist W.E.B Du Bois, for example, dedicates serious consideration to the psychological implications of this positioning in his famous collection of essays from 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Speaking to the position of black intellectuals in America, specifically, he describes their condition as one of a veiled 'double consciousness.' Within the context of this double consciousness, one is struck by "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁹ Du Bois goes on to describe the unrelenting sense of "two-ness" that characterizes this double consciousness: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two

⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 5.

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁰ By Du Bois’ description, then, this duality poses a psychic threat to the harmony and wellbeing of the soul.

Though published nearly half a century after Du Bois’ canonical work, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* deconstructs the same problem.¹¹ Fanon applies Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist economic critique to understand the sense of dependency and inadequacy often felt among black intellectuals in a white world. Using his own experience as a touchstone, Fanon unpacks the “the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization” of black inferiority, as well as the sense of a divided self widely experienced among black intellectuals.¹² He describes the ambivalent existence of a man torn between his black, African heritage and his aspiration to be recognized as *human* by the violently dominant, white, Euro-Christian system he inhabits. “I wanted to be typically Negro,” Fanon laments, “it was no longer possible. I wanted to be white—that was a joke. And, when I tried, on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my negritude, it was snatched away from me.”¹³ Thus Fanon, like Du Bois, articulates the psychic anguish of the black intellectual in a whitewashed world.

As Du Bois’ and Fanon’s works attest, intercultural-positioning among colonial Africans in Europe and North America has often been described and experienced as a profoundly distressing complex; but, as post-modern theorists have begun to recognize, it also presents an intriguing paradox. Media and culture professor Samir Dayal explains

¹⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 5.

¹¹ The novels and autobiographies of countless lesser-known Africans immigrants further attest to the psychological dissonance of diasporic double consciousness.

¹² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

this contradiction, noting that individuals at the interstices between cultures “*may* position themselves as resisting assimilation, liminally situated on the borders or fault lines, alive to the play of contradiction and to the unregulated possibilities of such a positioning.”¹⁴ While indisputably a source of psychological tension, then, this intercultural phenomenon—a state that Dayal describes as ‘diasporic double consciousness’—also affords an individual the critical perspective potentially conducive to a radical revaluation of self and society.

Post-colonial and post-modern theorist Homi Bhabha articulates a theory similar to Dayal’s. He calls this realm of intercultural possibility the ‘Third Space.’ Here, torn between paradigms, culture as an objective or absolute truth breaks down. The subject of diasporic double consciousness enters a realm of intercultural flexibility where “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; ... even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”¹⁵ Thus the ambivalence of cross-cultural realities deconstructs the presumed essentiality of cultural truth and introduces “something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”¹⁶ Divorced from essentialized assumptions of culture, the migrant has the mobility and the critical perspective to deconstruct engrained cultural realities and to render them in new and productive ways.

While this fragmentation of essentialized cultural categories is often observed as “a kind of pure anarchic liberalism or voluntarism,” it can also be understood “as a recognition of the importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of

¹⁴ Dayal, “Diaspora and Double consciousness,” 52.

¹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

¹⁶ Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space; Interview with Homi Bhabha,” (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 211.

solidarity.”¹⁷ Alienated from culturally imposed classifications of identity and self, the cultural transplant is awakened to the dynamic possibilities of representation. Thus, as Bhabha explains, “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”¹⁸

Through solidarity-building and collective empowerment efforts, disparate individuals within the Third Space can construct unified identities, thereby positioning themselves within discourses of power inaccessible to the isolated immigrant.

While the fact of intercultural positioning creates the potential for psychological stress, then, it also introduces a new realm of possibility. The flexibility of signs, symbols, and identities within this liminal space allows for two critical opportunities to arise. First, interculturally located peoples may deconstruct and reconstruct identity in innovative ways conducive to solidarity building and collectivization. In organizing, disparate individuals gain an important social voice that can potentially transform isolated powerlessness into collective power. Second, this intercultural limbo introduces a space in which the ideas fundamental to a given cultural paradigm can be, to reiterate Bhabha, “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”¹⁹ Through these two mechanisms, the disenfranchised people of the in-between can build power and negotiate advantage. Though this productive understanding of diasporic double consciousness and the Third Space is a heavily theoretical, post-colonial phenomenon, it can also enhance scholars’ studies of colonial interactions.

¹⁷ Rutherford, “The Third Space; Interview with Homi Bhabha,” 213.

¹⁸ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 2.

¹⁹ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 55.

West African Students in the Third Space

This thesis retroactively applies the post-colonial understanding of diasporic double consciousness and the Third Space to the social and political strategies of West African students active in London between 1900 and 1960. With the late-19th century development of the Pan-African movement, Britain-based students from across the Black Atlantic began to organize themselves into congresses and associations aimed both at promoting the interests of their home colonies and combating the racism that they faced as students abroad. Beyond these explicit political goals, however, their organizations also embraced a tacit social function. They acted as satellite communities engaged in the collective, piece-meal negotiation of new social identities, identities that remedied the dual alienation of students' intercultural angst by creating categories of belonging that transcended the English cultural paradigm as well as the African. Through these empowered collectivities, students freed themselves from other-ascribed functions and embraced their power to describe their own place in the world. West African students thus seized upon the 'unregulated possibilities' that Bhabha and Dayal describe in order to redirect the trauma of diasporic double consciousness toward productive ends.

One particularly long-lived and politically significant students' organization during the first half of the 20th century was the West African Students' Union, or the WASU. Founded in 1925 by a group of West African students studying abroad in the UK, the WASU grew to be a powerful sociopolitical tool based in the Pan-African ideals of unity, co-operation, and self-determination. By virtue of its internationally circulated publication (*Wasu* magazine and, later, *Wasu News-Service*), its student hostel in London, and its positioning as a hub for West African organization and communication, the

WASU built and maintained a strong physical and intellectual presence in Britain. The WASU, then, provided a concrete as well as an ideological foundation from which students could confront both the issues of racism they faced in the UK and the systematic exploitation and dehumanization being committed in their home countries. Until its dissolution in the 1960s, the WASU presented a powerful means of asserting embodied West African agency within the colonial paradigm.

With the creation of the WASU, West African students effectively harnessed the critical perspective afforded by diasporic double consciousness to construct an altogether new West African national identity. Founded upon the collective imagination of a post-colonial West African nation-state, this new identity transcended colonially dictated political boundaries as it united disparate cultural groups subject to a common oppression and exploitation. However, while the WASU's commitment to West African nationalism transcended ascribed identities, it was not totally liberated from them. Rather, the WASU tended toward what Bhabha identifies as 'mimicry,' or "a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power."²⁰ Students thus *reappropriated* the age-old justifications for colonial power—namely Christianity, civilization and commerce—to build West African nationalism. This allowed them to negotiate a favorable position within the context of colonial rule and, ultimately, to erode the ideological pillars of the colonial system.

In order to argue this point effectively, this thesis is broken into three chapters. The first explores the doctrine of 'the Three C's' as it applies to colonialism in West

²⁰ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 122-123.

Africa.²¹ It traces the ideological and material history of the Three C's and unpacks the process of their dissemination across West Africa as facilitated by the mission system and the missionary schools. This establishes the basic fundamentality of the Three C's to the British colonial project. The second chapter recounts the development of the WASU between 1925 and 1939, and explores how WASU members began to reappropriate and subvert the Three C's during this time. Throughout these years, students' discourse was characterized primarily by the reappropriation and subversion of Christianity, though as Hitler rose to power it shifted to a critique of European civilization as well. The third and final chapter explores the years between 1939 and 1957. This chapter again traces the historical developments of the WASU alongside the organization's rhetorical relationship with the Three C's. With World War II and the Cold War, students' dominant discourse changed from one centered on Christianity and civilization to one oriented around a critique of civilization and commerce.

²¹ Christianity, civilization and commerce.

I. CHRISTIANITY, CIVILIZATION AND COMMERCE: A HISTORY OF THE 'THREE C'S' IN WEST AFRICA

On a cold December morning in 1857, a crowd of graduates, undergraduates, and visitors from across the United Kingdom gathered at the University of Cambridge to hear David Livingstone speak. Recently returned from a fifteen-year stint in South and Central Africa, the famed missionary-cum-explorer regaled his audience with stories of a fertile landscape bursting with natural resources. These idyllic plains proffered “every type of tropical plant in rank luxuriance,” stalks of grass “as thick as quill,” and cotton “in great abundance.”²² These advantages, however, were lost on the native peoples, who had no maritime connections through which they might exploit this great abundance of resources. Livingstone thus expressed a desire to open a path to these rich areas, “that civilization, commerce, and Christianity might find their way there.”²³

But what place did a missionary have in advocating such outwardly commercial aims? For Livingstone, the “two pioneers of civilization—Christianity and commerce” were inseparably linked. He argued that these mutually supporting objectives could fill the British purse while also improving the standard of living for Africans, reigning in the evils of the slave trade, and transforming violent social institutions into peaceable pillars of civilized rule.²⁴ If, after all, Africans were producing their own, marketable goods for a European market, ‘legitimate’ trade would undermine the viability of the slave trade, an institution that many missionaries viewed as the greatest enemy to peace, prosperity and

²² William Monk, *Dr. Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1858), 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ Fidelis Nkomazana, “Livingstone's ideas of Christianity, commerce and civilization,” *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, 12 (1998): 45.

Christian progress in Africa.²⁵ Thus Christianity would pave a moral pathway that allowed for legitimate commerce, education, and good government to flourish; conversely, stable societies marked by civilization and commerce would embrace and propagate the principles of Christian morality.

Though Livingstone may have been the first to articulate the interconnectivity of these three objectives in such clear terms, he was certainly not the first to engage them as concurrent forces. As early as the 15th century, European merchants and missionaries had been manipulating the principles of Christianity, civilization and commerce in order to gain a foothold on the African continent. But despite what Livingstone and others would surely defend as good intentions, many modern scholars argue that these ‘Three C’s’ actually primed the African continent for European imperialism. Analyses of the imperial impacts of the Three C’s range from the Comaroff’s compelling socio-historical assessment of the neo-Protestant ethic as a vehicle for capitalism, to acute personal accusations directed at Livingstone himself. As Cecil Northcott writes in *David Livingstone: His Triumph, Decline, and Fall*, “Livingstone was a colonialist and was not ashamed of it. He was in Africa to offer the benefits of the white man’s civilization, and no latter day beliefs in the black man’s freedom, liberation and independence may be read into his actions.”²⁶ Regardless of the personal responsibility that one attributes to the missionaries themselves, it seems that missionary’s historical commitment to Christianity, commerce, and civilization did indeed help to lay the groundwork for colonial exploitation in Africa.

²⁵ Nkomazana, “Livingstone’s ideas of Christianity, commerce and civilization,” 45.

²⁶ Cecil Northcott, *David Livingstone: his triumph, decline, and fall*. (London: Westminster Press, 1973), 74.

While the outcome of this process may have been overtly imperial, the Three C's were not simply forced upon African peoples, nor were they blindly accepted on the basis of some superior validity. As F.K. Ekechi notes in his article *Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case, 1900-1915*, "People do not accept change for change's sake; they do so essentially because of the anticipated rewards that follow any innovation."²⁷ As contact between Euro-Christian and African cultural paradigms increased, Christianity—with its links to civilization and commerce—became a powerful tool for protection and socioeconomic mobility among African converts. No matter the superficiality of their dedication to the Church, missionary education among Africans was a means of negotiating and manipulating the changing circumstances of an increasingly difficult environment. Christianity thus served as a double-edged sword, unconsciously building up the Euro-Christian colonial paradigm even as it prepared colonial subjects with the tools to tear it down. European missionaries and Africans alike therefore had good reason to focus their attentions toward Christianity, and, as historian Edward H. Berman explains, "Africans were no less averse to using missionaries for their own purposes than the missionaries were for theirs."²⁸

Though this tendency toward the reappropriation of the Three C's began on the ground in West Africa, it continued to influence the means and mechanisms of colonial response clear through the 20th century. This held especially true among West African students of the WASU. In 1920s London as in 1870s Nigeria, West Africans *reappropriated* the age-old justifications for British imperialism—namely Christianity,

²⁷ F.K. Ekechi, "Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case, 1900-1915," *The Journal of African History*, 12 (1971): 104.

²⁸ Edward H. Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1975), xi.

civilization and commerce—to negotiate a favorable position within the context of colonial rule and, ultimately, to erode the ideological pillars of the colonial system. In order to understand this complicated relationship, however, we must first unpack the history of the Three C's throughout West Africa.

This chapter does just that. First, it introduces the interconnectivity of Christianity, civilization and commerce by providing a brief history of missionaries in West Africa. In the process, it presents some of the important themes, figures, and organizations that shaped missionary attitudes and activities across the region. Second, it explores the role of mission schools in the dissemination of the Three C's. This latter half of the chapter tries to understand the character of cultural imperialism in the missionary curriculum, especially through an analysis of missionary attitudes around 'civilization.' It further unpacks the relationship between education policy and European attitudes towards West African cultural and commercial potential. Finally, it introduces the ways that West Africans 'fought fire with fire' by using the Three C's to adapt to and ultimately rebel against the encroaching colonial paradigm. This will lay the foundation for a discussion of the identities, interests, and sociopolitical strategies of the West African students active in London throughout the twentieth century.

EARLY MISSIONARIES IN WEST AFRICA

1450-1800

Missionary activity in West Africa ultimately traces its origins to the mid-fifteenth century. It was then that Henry the Navigator, a Portuguese Prince and ruler of the world's most powerful fleet, hatched a plan to chart Africa's vast coastline. But this

quest had a religious aspect as well as a geographic one. Acting on a papal Letter of Indulgence that encouraged “the exaltation of the Catholic faith” during all expeditions, each ship in Henry’s fleet bore at its masthead the banner of the Order of Christ.²⁹ Portuguese ships were ordered to plant a cross on each African headland that they came across, and this request was evidently taken seriously. In 1482, for instance, the morning after a Portuguese ship arrived on the coast of modern-day Ghana, the crew celebrated Mass “and prayed for the conversion of the natives from idolatry, and the perpetual prosperity of the Church which they intended to erect on the spot.”³⁰ Despite this earnest fervor, however, the activities of the Portuguese were primarily symbolic and won—with the exception of a number of notables like the Kingdom of Kongo’s Mvemba Nzinga, who converted primarily as a means of garnering allies and facilitating trade relationships—few converts.³¹ Nevertheless, this symbolic Christianization of the West African coast continued for the next 300 years.

The religious impacts of these early efforts were narrow at best; it was not until the establishment of the Freetown colony during the 1790s that the Christian presence *truly* gained a foothold in West Africa. But such a development was no accident; it required vision, structure, and willing volunteers. The ideological vision for the Freetown development, first and foremost, grew out of a mid-eighteenth century evangelical revival known as the Great Awakening. Characterized by a staunch abolitionism, the Great Awakening swept across North America and Western Europe,

²⁹ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Martin Ballard, *White Men’s God: The Extraordinary Story of Missionaries in Africa*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), ix-xiii.

leaving in its wake “a tottering slave trade and a burgeoning missionary movement.”³²

This, scholars argue, set the stage for the founding of the various mission societies that would direct their attentions toward Africa in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

While the Great Awakening exhibited a certain sense of egalitarianism in its abolitionist ideals, it also belied biased beliefs about humanity and social development. The ‘awakened’ missionaries believed that Africans were redeemable, but they also felt that slavery had locked them into a state of arrested development characterized by a childlike primitiveness. Christianity and ‘legitimate trade’ would undercut the slave trade and allow Africans to rise to the ranks of ‘civilized’ peoples. Africans, then, were culturally rather than racially inferior, and could be improved. This paternalistic attitude, though radical for its time and ultimately well meaning, failed to recognize African cultures as viable and legitimate systems in their own right. Eurocentric thinking, then, was ideologically engrained in the philosophy of the Great Awakening, and characteristic, consequently, of the missionary movements that developed across West Africa.

Though the Great Awakening fomented the development of a plethora of mission-oriented organizations, one of its most active and influential products was the Clapham Sect. Established in London during the early 1790s, the Clapham Sect was a Protestant organization concerned primarily with the abolition of the slave trade and the geographic expansion of Christian virtue.³³ Members of the Clapham Sect understood, however, that abolition might not be enough. Africa’s human and material resources had been seriously

³² Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

depleted by the slave trade, and though abolition might “help salve Christian consciences,” it would do little to repair the harm inflicted by 300 years of enslavement.³⁴

Granville Sharp, a leading member of the Clapham Sect, began to explore this problem as early as the 1780s.³⁵ He proposed that beyond abolishing the slave trade, Christians should also work to restore—and in fact, reinvent—the African economy. T.F. Buxton elaborated upon this theme in his influential work, *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy*. Buxton—like Sharp before him and Livingstone after him—“argued that only when Africans became self-sustaining entrepreneurs, peasant farmers, and commercial men could the forces of western civilization take hold.”³⁶ Of course this emphasis on commercial expansion and the creation of a ‘civilized’ African middle-class also had implications for Britain. Britain’s burgeoning industrial economy demanded both new markets for British goods and a viable means of feeding the ever-growing urban proletariat; Africa’s fertile and populous landscape posed a resolution to both of these problems. Thus abolition and the ensuing establishment of post-enslavement industries and markets across West Africa were looked upon as a path to mutual benefit.³⁷ Here was a solution that was as Christian as it was convenient.

These commercial and Christian influences in mind, Granville Sharp set out to organize a small Christian settlement on the coast of Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, the settlement—founded in 1787 and populated by a rag-tag bunch of ex-prostitutes, poor Englishmen, and formerly enslaved black Britons—was the subject high mortality rates and violent local disputes. If the project were to survive, Sharp and his Clapham Sect

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

contemporaries knew that it must be expanded. They hoped to save their cause by establishing a larger, more permanent colony. From there, they would penetrate the fever-ridden interior by constructing a chain of mission stations along the Sierra Leone River and into the heart of Africa. These mission stations would double as trading posts for the Sierra Leone Company; thus, in characteristic Protestant fashion, trade and religion could advance up the river hand in hand.³⁸ What's more, if the enterprising Sierra Leone Company should prove profitable, it could show that 'legitimate trade' was a viable alternative to the slave trade throughout West Africa.

Given the failure of Sharp's initial venture, however, few were willing to act as on-the-ground instigators for the scheme. But in 1790, Thomas Peters, an ex-slave living in Halifax, Nova Scotia furnished a solution to this problem. After the outbreak of revolution in America not fifteen years earlier, Britain had recruited runaway slaves to form a battalion in the loyalist cause. Peters had been among the runaways who fought to preserve the Empire, but when the rebels won the war, they had been forced to flee. Britain shipped her black allies to Canada, where the runaways were promised both land and freedom. The territory they were delivered into, however, consisted largely of bitter swaths of frozen forest. Lacking both the tools and the finances needed to develop the land, some of Peters' band had been reduced to uprooting trees with their bare hands. Others were forced back into states of near slavery working as tenant farmers for white

³⁸ This trading company was established in tandem with Sharp's original project in 1787 as the St. George's Bay Company, but reborn under Thornton as the Sierra Leone Company in 1791. After the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807, control of this company would pass to the British crown.

landowners. The elected voice of this group, Peters had been sent to Britain to demand restitution from the British government.³⁹

Peters, then, was an answer to Sharp's prayers. Here was a body of colonists both devoutly Christian *and* black-skinned, who would be only too happy to be 'repatriated' to their imagined ancestral homelands.⁴⁰ The British Government agreed to furnish a fleet of ships for the journey, and in 1792 some 1,200 Baptist and Methodist settlers from Nova Scotia touched down on the coast of Sierra Leone.⁴¹ Settler's hopes were high, but again it seemed that they would be given less than they had been promised. Though the Sierra Leone Company governed quite liberally by contemporary standards, Peters and his fellows quickly found that instead of the fully participatory democracy they had hoped for, they would be ruled by "a motley collection of disillusioned and alcoholic whites."⁴² Even more upsetting, the company reneged on promises to endow each settler with rent-free land beside the ocean. Resentment toward these policies manifested in small acts of rebellion, and any long-term plans for a Nova Scotian venture to the interior dissolved in the ensuing discontent.

Efforts toward this project were redoubled later, however, under appointed governor Zachary Macaulay. An overseer-turned-abolitionist recently returned from Jamaica, Macaulay was responsible for implementing the religious as well as the economic initiatives of the Sierra Leone Company. His press toward the interior, however, was only marginally successful. Mende chieftans already conducting trade

³⁹ Ballard, *White Men's God*, 15.

⁴⁰ Not only did the British Government hoped that black-skinned individuals would be better received in West Africa, they also believed that African descendants might be less susceptible to malaria and other tropical diseases than Europeans.

⁴¹ Ballard, *White Men's God*, 15-16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

along the river opposed the Sierra Leone Company's abolitionist attitudes, as well as their attempts to circumvent Mende power by gaining direct access to inland markets.

However, the Mende were also interested in "accessing any mission education that would prepare their children for the task of making a living in a rapidly changing environment."⁴³ They therefore allowed missionary settlement along the river while simultaneously preventing the Sierra Leone Company from truly tapping into the markets that Macaulay had hoped to develop.

Though the push toward the interior continued only doggedly, Freetown quickly became a Christian stronghold in West Africa. The colony grew steadily as slave ships were intercepted and individuals reoriented within the Christian community. Between 1808 and 1830, some 30,000 're-captive' slaves joined the ranks of the Freetown colony.⁴⁴ While many of these re-captives converted to Christianity and stayed in Freetown permanently, others settled only briefly before departing for their homelands. European missionaries, too, supplemented the numbers at Freetown. Peters and his Nova Scotian settlers had earned a reputation as some of the most intensely devout people in the world, and missionaries from a variety of competing denominations flocked to Sierra Leone in the hopes of seeding West Africa with their particular brand of the Word. Some settled in Freetown while others attempted to spread their vision up river or across other parts of West Africa.

Life in West Africa, however, was notoriously difficult—much more difficult than many first envisioned. Besides the sudden—and to some, shocking—lack of

⁴³ Ballard, *White Men's God*, 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

modern conveniences, missionaries were also hit hard by tropical disease.⁴⁵ Mortality rates were exceedingly high, and many had barely settled down before they or members of their party became fatally ill. Despite these hardships, missionaries persevered. German Lutherans from recruiting stations in Basel and Berlin were especially self-sacrificing. As historian Martin Ballard explains, “They ... told each other how, like knights of old, they had to fill the enemy moat with their dead bodies, so that those who came after could scale the walls and take the castle.”⁴⁶ This sort of radical dedication proved crucial to the continued missionary presence in Sierra Leone, and was buoyed by a fundamental optimism about the effectiveness of Christianization. With the exception of a strong Islamic presence in areas like northern Nigeria, West Africa was generally void of the orthodox world religions that European missionaries had run up against in other parts of the globe. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists were notoriously difficult to convert, but missionaries saw existing West African belief systems as disorganized and innately inferior.⁴⁷ They were therefore convinced that once West Africans learned about Christianity they would immediately recognize its superiority and succumb to the goodness of its attending causes—civilization and commerce.⁴⁸

1800-1925

While Freetown continued to be the largest and most significant Christian stronghold on the West African coast, throughout the first half of the 19th century other

⁴⁵ A party of Methodist families was actually shipped home shortly after “the women started to complain that the town had no pastry shops where they could buy gingerbread for their children,” (Ballard, 18).

⁴⁶ Ballard, *White Men’s God*, 20.

⁴⁷ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

viable missionary communities began to develop as well. Liberia is one such example. Founded in 1820 by the American colonization society and organized after the Freetown model, Liberia became a home for freed American slaves. Like the settlers at Freetown, the newly introduced Liberians hoped to work toward civilizing West Africa by developing ‘legitimate trade’ and spreading the word of the Lord. In both Freetown and Liberia, however, the colonies’ Christian populations were composed predominantly of freed slaves. The evangelical objectives of these mission communities, then, were reduced to lip service as the project of converting local West Africans had largely failed. Historians attribute this failure to an “irreconcilable conflict of interest” between the overseas missionaries and the indigenous peoples they were attempting to convert; “imprisoned within formal dress, avoiding physical exertion and often carried around the countryside in chairs by black porters, most white missionaries seemed like alien creatures.”⁴⁹ These babbling aliens, evidently, were unconvincing.

By 1841, it had become clear that this evangelical strategy needed to be reconsidered. Henry Venn, a Clapham Sect member and the new secretary of the predominantly Protestant CMS, settled on a policy that other, smaller missionary projects had already been utilizing for decades—overseas missionaries were to assume a secondary role to the native African missionaries that they trained. The body of these native missionaries would be recruited from among the re-captives living in the Freetown colony, educated as priests, and sent inland to disseminate the civilizing message of God. Christianity, commerce, and civilization were therefore to be established and spread as synonymous forces through the medium of African-directed missionary education.

⁴⁹ Ballard, *White Men’s God*, 33.

While this became a central tenet of the Protestant plan in West Africa, Catholics—with their papal orthodoxy—continued to reject the notion of African-directed evangelism through the 20th century.

Venn's strategy proved wildly more successful than the last. But even with this new approach, missionary involvement in West Africa was confined largely to the coastline until the 1870s.⁵⁰ There were, of course, some exceptions to this rule. Wesleyan Methodists and Anglicans pressed into modern day Nigeria as far as the Abeokuta kingdom, and in 1857—the same year that Livingstone delivered his moving testimony at Cambridge—the CMS opened a successful station at Onitsha, Niger. Despite these minor penetrations, however, the West African interior remained “virtually untouched by missionary activity and propaganda.”⁵¹

Beginning in the 1870s, however, a series of technological and political developments turned the West African interior from ‘the white man’s grave’ to the missionary frontier. The invention of the steamship, the discovery of new water and disease treatment methods, and the application of quinine in combating malaria proved invaluable in facilitating this shift. The Scramble for Africa of 1884 and 1885 also expedited the movement. Though missionaries did not outwardly align themselves with colonial governments, the military and administrative presence of colonial offices across West Africa established inroads for missionary activity. The 1896 military subjugation of the Ashanti region, for example, opened an access route to the Gold Coast’s interior that had been closed to missionaries for nearly 50 years.⁵² Just as Christianity,

⁵⁰ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16.

commerce, and civilization were heralded as the mutually supporting underpinnings of white enlightenment, then, missionaries, imperialists, and colonial officials succeeded in penetrating the West African interior only by their collective efforts.

Thanks to new technologies, sizeable government stipends, and increased European presence throughout West Africa, the early twentieth century saw a boom in the missionary presence. Just as European powers had engaged in a frantic scramble for West African territory, rival Christian denominations were increasingly competing for West African souls. The Catholics and the Protestants, particularly, engaged in an ongoing and deeply rooted struggle. Some felt that this sort of heedless competition made a spectacle of the white man as well as the Christian faith. As Frederick Lugard once noted, “the spectacle of the jealousy between the rival missions has a very bad effect on the people, and increases the tendency towards indiscipline.”⁵³

Nevertheless, West Africans, it seemed, were beginning to accept Christianity, though not on the unilateral basis that the missionaries may have expected. The success of a particular Church’s methods hinged largely upon the type and value of benefits that they offered to converts. Catholics and Protestants alike attempted to assume dominance by offering benefits to those who joined their church. The Catholics were the first to understand that free education was the key to success, and thus this denominational rivalry fueled a sudden and startling increase in the number of mission schools in West Africa. As Catholic Bishop Joseph Shanahan noted, “those who hold the school hold the country, hold its religion, hold its future.”⁵⁴ In Igboland alone, the number of students

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

attending Catholic school rose from 2,000 to over 30,000 between 1906 and 1932.⁵⁵

Protestants showed similar gains in other parts of Nigeria. Between 1901 and 1911, the CMS reported an increase from 5 to 46 schools and from 392 to 4,066 students.⁵⁶

Already a central tenet to the missionary program, schools became the locus of power among rival evangelists seeking to extend the influence of Christianity, civilization and commerce across West Africa.

THE MISSION SCHOOLS

Civilization and Culture at the Mission Schools

Though Europeans generally failed to recognize West African educational institutions as such, societies throughout West Africa “had an educational system in operation long before the white man appeared on the scene.”⁵⁷ These systems varied across sociocultural bodies, but each was central to maintaining the cultural heritage of a given people. Among the Poro and Bundu people of Sierra Leone, for example, education involved gender-specific socialization, vocational training, and, at puberty, compulsory indoctrination into the secret orders of adult life.⁵⁸ The processes of initiation could take anywhere from weeks to years as students learned the rites, ceremonies, laws, and ethics of their people. This complex curriculum achieved the goal of any education—it socialized a body of youth who could function effectively within their sociocultural paradigm as they collectively reproduced it.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Edward Coleson, “The Impact of European Education in West Africa,” *History of Education Journal*, 6 (Winter, 1955): 169.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

In the late 15th century, however, new forms of education and socialization began to appear along the shores of West Africa.⁵⁹ European merchants established schools as a means of achieving their business objectives, while missionaries hoped to use education to spread the word of the gospel. Though missionaries eventually assumed the primary role in directing educational institutions, merchants and, later, colonial governments played a significant role in financing these schools. All three parties saw education as a key to power and influence throughout West Africa, and the curriculum reflected their various agendas. The educational program thus “became a hybrid of commerce and evangelization” couched in a fundamentally Eurocentric understanding of the world. It aimed at recreating Europe’s cultural and commercial paradigm among Britain’s future West African subjects.⁶⁰

While missionaries often refuted claims to *biological* inferiority, nineteenth century missionaries held their own biases and beliefs about the inferiority of West African *cultures*. As Berman explains, “Many missionaries truly believed that Africans were savages, whose barbaric tendencies were manifested in their pagan customs, licentious dancing and drumming, and communal family structures.”⁶¹ Civilized, Christian Africans, then, would be recognized by the fact that they rejected traditional culture in favor of European lifeways.⁶² Emphasis during the early years of educational expansionism, then, was on creating better Christians who would consume the ideological and material trappings of ‘modern’ culture. The curriculum ignored topics

⁵⁹ Offori Attah, Kwabena Dei, “The British and Curriculum Development in West Africa: A Historical Discourse,” *International Review of Education*, 53 (Sept, 2006): 411.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 7.

⁶² Ballard, *White Men’s God*, 12.

relevant to the spiritual and cultural lives of local peoples, and as a condition of attendance, missionaries actually required that all students adopted European dress, culture, language, and values.

Within the missionary educational paradigm, then, ‘civilization’ became synonymous with goodness, white skin, the English language, and the achievements of Euro-Christian industrial society while ‘barbarism’ was linked to blackness and all things culturally West African. This had serious implications for West African students and facilitated, in Fanon’s words, “the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of [African] inferiority.” Intentionally or inadvertently, then, the missionary education system manipulated cultural definitions of goodness and productivity in a way that subjugated West Africans and ultimately served the interests of Britain’s developing economy. This effect was only exacerbated by the late 19th century shift from literary to vocational education across West Africa.

Education Policy: Literary and Vocational Training

Christianity—and especially the Protestant Christianity of West Africa’s most powerful early missionary organization, the CMS—depends on the subject’s ability to read and interpret the Bible themselves. Early schools, then, were aimed at creating a student body that was Biblically literate, and the curriculum was mostly focused around materials that would enable students to conduct evangelist and catechist duties. But education was not bound exclusively to religious topics. Missionaries in the early part of the 19th century generally believed that Africans were culturally rather than biologically inferior; thus they needed only to be exposed to Christianity and western education in

order to progress. Secular subjects, then, were also sometimes included in the curriculum. In Nigeria, for example, Methodist missionary T.B. Freeman developed an educational model that included “singing, scripture, prayers, reading, spelling, writing, ciphering, catechism, and the four R’s—religion, reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic.”⁶³ These ‘four R’s’ became popular among institutions throughout West Africa.

However, while Protestants operated under the Free Church idea of ultimate autonomy and therefore hoped to create an independent clergy that would evangelize without the help of white or overseas missionaries, Catholic missions had no intention of preparing West Africans to operate and evangelize on their own.⁶⁴ They deferred to the Pope for Biblical interpretation and the maintenance of the faith. This made for practical denominational differences in Protestant and Catholic curriculums. As Berman notes, “commentators have remarked on the docile and dependent nature of Catholic Africans as opposed to the independent and self-reliant nature of many African Protestants.”⁶⁵ Some Protestants even argued that the Catholic strategy played into the colonial system by training “a subservient class useful to the dominant race” rather than an African elite. In any case, Protestant institutions tended to have a more literary focus than Catholic missionary schools.

But by the 1840s, a growing current of social evolutionary thinking in Europe had begun to challenge this tendency. In 1842, Royal Commissioners charged with investigating the effectiveness of missionary education systems across West Africa concluded that Catholic and Protestant missionaries alike were “wasting their time with

⁶³ Ballard, *White Men’s God*, 8.

⁶⁴ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 24.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

the current educational fare because the underdeveloped African intellectual faculties precluded retention of abstractions.”⁶⁶ Among government officials, then, West Africans were understood to be an irredeemable race, suited only to becoming lower-tiered laborers within the dynamo of European industrial civilization. Government officials suggested that missionaries engaged in vocational rather than intellectual and religious training. This, they argued pragmatically, would serve the purposes of West Africans and Britons alike; West Africans would be prepared to assume positions as paid laborers and British commercial interests would have a ready supply of semi-skilled and semi-literate labor. Missionaries, however, were not so easily persuaded. Despite the attacks on their methods, missionaries “continued to insist on the improvability of their West African clientele.”⁶⁷ The government proposition, it seemed, would undermine the religious aspects of their work and infect pupils with a “loose and secular orientation.”⁶⁸ This fundamental disagreement about the potential and purposes of the missionary curriculum would persist as a source of dispute through the 1880’s.

Though missionary administrators like Henry Venn continued to advocate that literary education be taught in tandem with manual skills, by the late nineteenth century pseudo-scientific racism had won out and manual labor was being trumpeted as “the panacea for [African’s inherent] malaise.”⁶⁹ Most missionaries, then, assumed a racist vision of West Africans as “semi-barbarians” incapable of achieving the standards of European civilization.⁷⁰ Since the general image of the West African was “of a lazy

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

scoundrel wallowing in heathen superstition,” missionaries ultimately adopted the educational systems popularly used among the English working class, who was thought to suffer a similar weakness.⁷¹ This curriculum emphasized the spiritual significance of hard work—a philosophy that fueled imperial economies as it enlightened souls. Beyond being a cure for laziness, Europeans widely believed that vocational training could instill West Africans with the Protestant and Catholic values that would offset their ‘characteristic depravity’. They valorized “rationality, progressivism, systematic inquiry, industriousness, and adaptability” as the trademarks of the civilized order.⁷² As one Catholic missionary worker noted in 1902, “Without work, the Black will always remain what he is today—a savage.”⁷³

This shift in thinking about the very potential of West African peoples changed the missionary curriculum in dramatic ways. In the aftermath of the Scramble for Africa, missionaries increasingly began to turn toward vocational rather than literary strategies. This attitude was further buoyed by the success of American vocational schools, and it spread like wildfire. At a Home Board meeting in 1890, the CMS agreed to make vocational training a centerpiece of their curriculum. Not three years later, a group of Presbyterians opened a vocational institute in South East Nigeria, and by 1895 another had been opened in Freetown.⁷⁴ While this shift was based in ideology, it also had practical implications among the missions. Most missions were working on a very tight

⁷¹ Ballard, *White Men’s God*, 8.

⁷² Michael Adas, “Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology,” *Journal of World History*, 15 (Mar., 2004): 35.

⁷³ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 11.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

budget, and technical schools that produced some sort of marketable good or service were more economically viable than the older missions had been.⁷⁵

In the wake of World War I, however, government aid alleviated some of this financial pressure. Since 1910, missionary delegates to the World Missionary Conference had been expressing discontent with government policy in Africa.⁷⁶ Despite the fact that missionaries, especially in their capacity as educators, contributed significantly to the available administrative workforce and the stability of the colonial system, missions were financed with little real help from the government. In order for missionary work to continue and to spread, missionaries would need the aid of the British government. Though this demand initially went unheeded, the Colonial Office was ultimately pressured into increased cooperation with the missionary societies, especially in regards to education policy. In 1925, the Colonial Office issued an official statement on African education that codified a system of subsidies and grants in order to sustain the missionary system.⁷⁷

Increased government involvement allowed the missions to spread at a faster pace, but it also put pressures on the missionaries to cater to the Colonial Office's curricular expectations. The dependency on government grants, for example, forced a shift toward the English language. Many missionaries had made a point of learning and teaching in indigenous languages, but with this change "any educational institution that wanted a government grant was to make sure that only English was used as the medium

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

of instruction.”⁷⁸ This had a profoundly imperializing effect, since, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o explains, “the cage of language set the limits and had much to do with fixing the agenda of that interchange.”⁷⁹ The formalization of British colonialism also ushered in a renewed focus on vocational training. The topics at the heart of the curriculum “were intended to transform the African, in his own environment, to serve the needs of a colonial government and a new African society.”⁸⁰ Instead of training West African students to be successful members of their own communities, then, “the new, British curriculum emphasized courses that would prepare West Africans to speak English and to seek employment as clerks, teachers, missionaries, or law enforcement officers in the British West African Colonies.”⁸¹ Thus missionary schools worked to facilitate the spread of Christianity, civilization and commerce throughout West Africa.

West African Reactions to Missionary Education

Initially, many West Africans resisted the Anglicizing force of Christian culture, and enrollment to the mission schools was quite low. In fact prior to the twentieth century, the mission schools attracted primarily outcasts and were regarded with “respectful indifference” by most West Africans.⁸² This was not, however, unilaterally true. Notables like Kongo’s Nzinga or Yorubaland’s Chief Sodeke actually embraced the missionary cause, primarily as a means of manipulating political and economic

⁷⁸ Attah, “The British and Curriculum Development in West Africa,” 417.

⁷⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986).

⁸⁰ Attah, “The British and Curriculum Development in West Africa,” 416.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁸² Ekechi, “Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa,” 103.

circumstance.⁸³ Collaboration with the missionaries, Berman explains, “enabled the traditional rulers to retain some control over the course of events within their kingdoms at a time when many African leaders were forfeiting their power.”⁸⁴ Thus these leaders hoped to modernize their political roles while also maintaining the cultural viability of the societies they governed. But local leaders also recognized the danger of opening their kingdoms to Western influence. Rather than appealing to the existing educational systems—systems that worked to replicate and preserve the social norms and power structures of local communities—missionaries used education to socialize their students into a culturally European paradigm. The curriculum ignored topics relevant to the spiritual and cultural lives of local peoples, and often undermined existing social structures. In ascriptive societies, particularly, missionary schools actually threatened local power systems by presenting possibilities for social mobility that circumscribed existing hierarchies.⁸⁵

By the 1870s, the Euro-Christian cultural and commercial paradigm had become an undeniable reality across West Africa. Within this context, the social, political, and economic rewards of a missionary education began to accumulate and crystallize, and more people began to gravitate toward the missions. F.K. Ekechi’s historical study of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria sheds light upon this dynamic. Among the Igbo, evidence of educational benefits began to culminate in the early 1900s when military infiltration of British West Africa became increasingly unruly and violent. It quickly became evident, however, that Christian villages were being treated with a measure of

⁸³ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

immunity and respect. As a result, increasing numbers of Igbo men began to associate themselves with the Christian missions.⁸⁶ Those who did so were also exempt from being forced to join exploitative labor and portage systems, and no longer had to fear imprisonment or flogging for refusing to comply with the government-enforced Forced Labor Ordinance or failing to pay local fines. In all of these instances, missionaries stepped in to represent and defend their converts.⁸⁷

While Ekechi's example speaks to the Igbo specifically, similar circumstances were unfolding across West Africa. Beyond providing protection and representation, mission schools also provided an avenue "to higher jobs and overall economic improvement."⁸⁸ Catholic schools became especially popular since they were free and taught in English, a language that served as "a passport for higher economic and social status."⁸⁹ But the mission schools established to spread Christianity also furnished their West African students with the tools they would need to protect themselves from, and ultimately strike back against, colonial institutions. This proved especially useful when combating localized abuse. Beyond providing a structure to understand and respond to local exploitation, mission schools also provided West Africans with the educational tools and the ideological foundation they would need to rebel against the colonizers. As Ekechi again explains, "the acquisition of Western education was a means to an end; education would provide the weapon with which to fight colonialism."⁹⁰ Thus, the missionary schools, though established with the purpose of spreading Christianity, also

⁸⁶ Ekechi, "Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa," 105.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

acted as a counterforce against the exploitative effects of colonialism. This would prove especially true among the West African students who followed their education to the university level.

By the early 20th century the increased use-value of a missionary education had begun to seriously stimulate popular enrollment throughout West Africa. Since West Africans generally believed that they could maintain their existing beliefs and educational systems while also enrolling in a missionary institution, those who attended the mission schools stood to gain in abstract and material terms. As Berman explains, “Schools were considered adjuncts to the primary purpose of conversion. Africans, for their part, were more interested in the practical uses of the schools than in the missionaries’ religious message.”⁹¹ Thus it was the combined promise of social, political, and economic rewards rather than some *a priori* appeal of Christianity or European civilization that drew West Africans to the missions. Since the early days of contact, then, West Africans systematically adopted and adapted the influences Christianity, civilization and commerce in order to negotiate advantage within a changing sociopolitical system. This reappropriation of the Three C’s would continue to influence power dynamics among West Africans who followed their education to university in Britain.

⁹¹ Berman, *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, 33.

II. REAPPROPRIATING CHRISTIANITY AND CIVILIZATION: THE WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS' UNION (1925-1939)

In 1932, at the seventh anniversary service of the West African Students' Union in Freetown, the British Bishop of Sierra Leone regaled his African audience with a sympathetic tale:

Thirty-eight years ago, I stood in a road in London *alone, a stranger*, knowing no one and knowing not whither to go, except back to the lodgings I had taken. I was a lad of 20, and had just left my home in the country, nearly 200 miles away, to work in London. I shall never forget the feeling of utter loneliness I had on that day. Now if I felt the loneliness, I, still among my own people, still in my own land, what must the feeling be when a young man or young woman from West Africa, or indeed any other part of Africa, finds himself or herself in that vast city of London?⁹²

For the West African adults in the audience, many of them alumni of London universities or parents of students abroad, the story was a familiar one. Though Bishop Wright was an Englishman and they African, the loneliness and isolation he describes was central to the overseas university experience.

But students developed creative ways of remedying this loneliness. With the late-nineteenth century development of the Pan-African movement, Britain-based students from across the Black Atlantic began to organize themselves into congresses and associations aimed both at promoting the interests of their home colonies and combating the racism and isolation that they faced as students abroad. During the early years of student organization, dialogues of transcendence and resistance hinged upon a common Christianity. As Bishop Wright explains:

Had I known on that day of a Hostel which had been specially built or rented that its doors might be open to such a lonely person as myself I should have gone to it immediately... I would have said, '*I thank Thee, oh Father*' for those who thought

⁹² *Wasu* 1:9, December 1932, 11-13.

of such a scheme, who not only dreamed dreams and saw visions, but worked away until the Hostel had become a thing in being... Such a Hostel as this, in which the best men from the Colonial Office, *in which the leaders from the CMS, WMMS, and other Missionary Societies, together with a host of other Christians of the highest character are interested*—this is just the place where such a sharing of friendships and fellowships can take place.⁹³

As West Africans were manipulating Christianity to negotiate advantages within the Third Space of cultural contact at home, then, students abroad also used the tools and mechanisms of Christianity to their own benefit. Rather than really questioning the righteousness of the colonial project, however, students manipulated the material support of Christian organizations and the ideological tenets of Christian morality to justify West African humanity and advocate for Euro-Christian progress in their home colonies. Thus conservative Christian influences continued to shape the modes and means of student action and collectivization through the mid-1930s.

With the early stirrings of World War II, however, students' interests began to shift beyond the enlightenment discourse of Christianity. It was becoming blatantly obvious to West African students that Christian values were *not*, in fact, at the core of European decision-making; a Christian argument for the equal humanity and equal treatment of African peoples, then, fell mostly on deaf ears. While students continued to use Christianity as a moral and material force for collectivization, the forms of Christianity that they employed began to feature a nationalistic break from the hypocrisy of the European discourse. Following the first hostilities of World War II—most notably the invasion of Abyssinia—students' focus shifted instead to the alleged superiority of European *civilization*. Students thus opted to quit the moralistic rhetoric surrounding

⁹³ *Ibid.*

progress and enlightenment for a political viewpoint that interrogated the *foundations* of Euro-Christian civilization and, by extension, colonialism.

This chapter explores how students of the West African Students' Union (WASU) engaged the ideological and material resources at their disposal in an ongoing quest sociopolitical advantage. It begins by providing a short history of West African students in Britain, focusing particularly on the impacts and uses of Christian influences among those early students. Next it traces the development of the WASU from its origins through the Second World War. It explores the conflicts among students, between students and the colonial office, and on an international scale, that defined the attitudes and opinions of the organization across time. These conflicts shaped West African unity and facilitated a shift in thinking among West African students concerning the relationship between Britain and her colonies. Between 1925 and the outbreak of World War II, WASU members increasingly shifted from the reappropriation of Christian influences to the manipulation of the terms of civilization in order to access and develop narratives of unity and political power.

WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS IN BRITAIN

A Brief History

West African peoples were an established demographic in Britain well before the founding of the WASU in 1925. Historical evidence actually traces an African presence as far back as the Roman period, though a lasting student body did not develop until the

eighteenth century.⁹⁴ It was then that missionaries—and particularly Protestant missionaries—began to partner with trading companies in order to send promising young West African men to England, and by 1788 there were more than 50 West African students living in Liverpool alone.⁹⁵ Even during these early years, the presence of West Africans in Britain was a matter of convergent interests. British missionaries, imperialists, and government officials viewed English-educated West Africans as an important resource. For these parties, a British education among the West African elite meant the establishment of moral and political influence in the region. They wished to groom a class of translators, culturally English yet physically African, who could instigate a movement toward the mutually supporting tenets of Christianity, civilization and commerce. For the West African elite, on the other hand, this dynamic presented a means of facilitating trade relationships and preserving political power in an increasingly global context.⁹⁶

During the 19th century, this educational relationship began to encourage suspicion and even hostility among many conservative West Africans, who saw their English-educated brethren as traitors or social climbers with no real right to authority. A wariness that began during the slave trade when many European-affiliated West Africans could be linked to human trafficking activities, this mistrust was not unfounded. Nor was it a one-way aversion; the rift between English-educated and non-English-educated West Africans was felt on both sides of the divide. Educated West Africans envisioned

⁹⁴ Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960): Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Communism*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), 2-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-5.

themselves as separate from and even above the backwards ‘bush people’.⁹⁷ In the words of the first editor of the WASU, Melville C. Marke, “it is one of our anxieties to enlighten those of our people who are still in darkness.”⁹⁸ English-educated West Africans in the early part of the twentieth century thus saw it as their duty and even their Christian obligation to bring the bush people into the civilizing light of European education—a sentiment ironically and uncannily similar to the white man’s burden.

Though West African students who followed their education to England stood to profit both economically and sociopolitically from this arrangement, their aspirations toward mutual benefit were routinely undermined by the contradictory attitudes and opinions of their British hosts. Britain’s paradoxical approach to West Africa, one that “combined slave trading with abolition, education with exploitation and the pursuit of profit with philanthropy,” informed the development of mixed sympathies among West African students.⁹⁹ Many were torn between their appreciation for the ‘modernizing influence’ of British civilization and their disgust for the cultural and racial subjugation they experienced as colonial subjects.¹⁰⁰ Though socialized as Englishmen, their bodies were ascribed with an otherness, a darkness that haunted the English imaginary. Ostracized, socially and legally, from the right of true belonging, these West African ‘translators’ took on the psychic anguish that Du Bois describes as double-consciousness and Fanon details in his canonical work, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

James Africanus Horton, a Sierra Leonean who graduated from Edinburgh University in 1859, became one of the first West Africans in Britain to publish works that

⁹⁷ *Wasu* 2, December 1926, 42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁹ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

embodied this internal conflict and the political paradox it produced.¹⁰¹ While Horton expressed a desire for racial equality and West African self-government, he imagined a government that—rather than adhering to any particularly African social framework—would follow the political and philosophical traditions of the British. And Horton was not alone. Through the 1930s, West African nationalists educated in England tended to champion British civilization and Christianity while simultaneously advocating increased West African political participation.¹⁰² This evident faith in British sociopolitical structures reflects what could be interpreted either as the hegemonic influence of the English education system or the propagation of strategic self-interest; in championing a syncretic marriage of the Euro-Christian cultural paradigm *and* West African political participation, early West African nationalists envisioned a future political structure characterized by roles that they alone could reasonably inhabit.

Since the very early days of the colonial relationship, then, West African students in England found themselves at the contentious midpoint of a many-sided power play. In an external sense, West African students inhabited a place between various economic and sociopolitical interests—each which sought to use them to achieve the upper hand within a burgeoning imperial politics. While this positioning inspired considerable stress within the Anglicized subject of British colonialism, it also allowed West African students a certain advantage. In strategically manipulating the area of interest that they occupied—especially through the reappropriation of the *terms* of colonial power—West African students had the potential to position themselves favorably within global discourses of power and privilege.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 8.

Christianity and Pan-African Unity

Christianity was consistently a central tenet of new narratives of unity and power. As established in chapter one, Christianity and Western education are virtually synonymous in the context of West African history. There were practical differences, though, in the psychosocial impacts of Christian education depending on the level of a student's education and the environment in which they were educated. In West Africa, the missions constituted an attempt by a geopolitically and denominationally fractured white minority to bring the social, political, and economic realities of a profoundly Euro-Christian system to the shores of West Africa. The tension between Euro-Christian and West African cultural paradigms introduced a new playing field, one in which West Africans of diverse cultural backgrounds could selectively adopt and adapt elements of the missionary system in order to negotiate the rapidly changing circumstances brought on by the presence of British arms and ideologies.

Though the cultural dissonance between European missionaries and the West African peoples they hoped to 'civilize' was palpable at the mission schools, this division became even more salient among those who followed their educational career to England. Marginalized in an endless sea of white faces, West African students in England were no longer the majority selectively playing the rules of a powerful minority. Their 'otherness' became something acutely experienced, especially via incidents of racism. Through the process of education, however, home was also reconstituted, and many students discovered that they no longer related to their own people as they had before. Betwixt and between divergent realities, West African students of disparate countries,

cultural backgrounds, and political reckonings, were drawn together by a common psychosocial alienation.

Though this alienation may have been the most immediate or pressing force that determined their unity, it was not the only commonality that West African students in Britain shared. Some students had a common mother tongue, cultural background, or cosmological outlook. These tended to come from areas that were geographically proximate. All of the West African students in Britain had some shared history through the holocaust of enslavement, though this would not be vocalized or capitalized upon as a point of unity until the late twentieth century—perhaps because many students came from families that could attribute their power to distant slave trading activities.¹⁰³ A common thread among nearly all West African students in Britain, however, and one that both manifested across time and defined the forms that collectively imagined bonds of unity took, was Christianity. All West African students in Britain had climbed the missionary ladder in order to gain access to English institutions of higher education, and thus all of them had longstanding connections to some form of Christianity.

Beyond this historical connection to Christianity that West African students shared, Christianity also constituted an immediate and pervasive presence in Britain. West African students understood Britain to be “a Christian land where all the Christian values were practiced,” and in fact Christian organizations often assumed responsibility for students once they arrived.¹⁰⁴ Organizations like the Committee for the Welfare of Africans in Europe (CWAE) and the Student Christian Movement (SCM) helped students

¹⁰³ Mulana Karenga. *Introduction to Black Studies*, (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 20-22.

¹⁰⁴ Philip Garigue, “The West African Students’ Union: A Study in Culture Contact,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 23:1 (Jan., 1953), 56.

to find lodging and worked to simultaneously “bring African students into contact with ‘the better side of British life’” and “shield [them] from untoward or subversive influences.”¹⁰⁵ As they had in West Africa, students continued to adopt and adapt these Christian influences to meet their own desired ends. Christianity, then, served not only as a medium to gain physical access to the technologies, tools, and politics at the heart of empire, but also as an accepted ideological foundation from which students could combat the racism and colonial oppression they experienced abroad.

THE WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS’ UNION (WASU)

Early Stirrings: Ladipo Solanke, the Empire Exhibition, and the NPU

Following the first Pan-African conference in 1900, African students’ associations became almost commonplace in Britain. While some were founded with overt business or political objectives, others acted primarily as social spaces for overseas students. The bodies that organized and helped fund these associations were as varied as the groups themselves. Despite the various interests and objectives involved, however, most African students’ organizations shared at least one common concern: the problem of racism.¹⁰⁶ In the wake of World War I immigration to Britain from the colonies had increased, and by the late 1920s there were more than 125 African students in Britain.¹⁰⁷ This renewed visibility had prompted the resurfacing of old fears about race and sexuality, and students were often targeted by racist propaganda. Housing, especially, became a problem, as segregationist laws prevented ‘colored’ peoples from renting rooms in English

¹⁰⁵ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

establishments.¹⁰⁸ Pan-African racial solidarity grew and students' organizations became increasingly vocal and unified in the face of this aggression.

This was the sociocultural context that greeted Ladipo Solanke—co-founder to-be of the WASU—upon his arrival in London. Solanke's story was not such an unfamiliar one. Born to elite Christian parents in Nigeria, Solanke attended missionary school in Abeokuta before spending several years at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone.¹⁰⁹ When he came to London in 1922 to study law, Solanke was appalled by the status of race relations.¹¹⁰ Outspoken and articulate, he began to make a name for himself as a political voice for the West African community in Britain.

Solanke found the 1924 British Empire Exhibition's portrayal of 'native' West African peoples particularly objectionable.¹¹¹ Shortly before the exhibition, London newspapers began to circulate lurid articles with misrepresentative commentary about West African, and particularly Nigerian, peoples. While this was likely a sensationalist means of attracting visitors, Solanke and other Nigerian students in London did not take kindly to the accusations of primitivism and cannibalism they saw in the press. Together, they began a campaign denouncing the articles and photographs that surrounded the exhibition for "hold[ing] up to public ridicule citizens of countries whose money has been voted in large sums for the purpose of the exhibition."¹¹² Students' agency was affirmed when the Colonial Office begrudgingly began to take steps to prevent further derogatory works from being published.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-42.

¹⁰⁹ "The WASU Project: Key Figures," last modified January 29, 2012, <http://wasuproject.org.uk/2012/01/29/key-figures-ladipo-solanke/>.

¹¹⁰ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 24.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

The 1924 Empire Exhibition was a turning point for African students in several ways. First, it served as a central rallying point for students already suffering from varied and insidious forms of institutional racism. It provided them with an identifiable and overt example of the sort of behavior they hoped to bring to an end, and in fomenting this collective cooperation inspired a new national consciousness among West African students. Besides providing a point of unity and collectivization, the Empire Exhibition also served to politicize students' focus. Though the most popular African students' organization of the day, the Union for Students of African Descent (USAD), was a self-identified apolitical group, the Empire Exhibition affirmed the potential and the need for a stronger student politics. The fact that students had actually been able to prompt a reaction from the Colonial Office gave life to political possibility, and the meetings and protest campaigns that developed around the Empire Exhibition ultimately "became a forum for a wide ranging debate over the future of West Africa, the issues facing West African students, and the need for West Africans in Britain to form their own independent organisations."¹¹³ This movement toward politicization was further buoyed by the fact that politics in West Africa, too, were changing. New opportunities for African leadership were opening up, stimulating a renewed interest in elite politics. Students in London, especially those who studied law, had hopes for one day inhabiting these emerging positions. The Empire Exhibition, then, provided a platform for individual students—students like Ladipo Solanke—to exhibit their leadership skills and develop their political talents.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

Riding the political momentum of the Empire Exhibition, Solanke soon decided to found his own students' organization: the Nigerian Progress Union (NPU). This was the first locally specific organization of its kind, and a significant step in defining an Afrocentric national identity. Solanke and his peers believed Nigeria to be "full of immense possibilities" and "undeveloped resources and wealth."¹¹⁴ Failure to develop these possibilities was pegged not on the colonial status of Nigeria, but instead on the inadequacies of the education system. The NPU's primary goal, then, was to popularize forms of vocational education throughout Nigeria—a policy, ironically, also favored by the British government.¹¹⁵ But Solanke's goals were not solely political; he also fostered a moral agenda. Like many of his peers, Solanke found life in London to be licentious and corrupt. He condemned the sexual looseness of some of his Nigerian friends, especially as they seemed to be "practising polyandry among the white girls", and felt that students must live a "high moral life" if they were to become successful leaders and politicians.¹¹⁶ A Yoruba teacher in his spare time, Solanke also worried that Nigerian students were losing interests in their cultural roots.

Beyond Solanke's political agenda then, the Nigerian Progress Union was inspired by a Christian moral ethos and a concern for the preservation of 'traditional' Nigerian culture. This syncretic marriage of English and Nigerian cultural paradigms into an outwardly political students' union captures the essence of London's Third Space

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter I for further details. I note that this is 'ironic' because the emphasis on vocational rather than literary training was born of a renewed belief in the racially inherent mental inferiority of African peoples. Though Solanke probably had his own reasons for pursuing this policy, he may have been subconsciously influenced by racist ideological currents in England.

¹¹⁶ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 27.

potentiality. Suspended in the liminal space between cultural paradigms, Solanke manipulated the tenets of both in order to facilitate the development of a new and politically advantageous collectivity that could support and further his own interests.

Bankole-Bright and West African Unity

By 1925 the Nigerian Progress Union had become fairly successful in its own right, but Solanke and others were beginning to recognize a flaw in the regional specificity of such a project. Pan-African projects, on the other hand, were appealing in ideological scope, but often seemed too large and generalized to be effective in addressing regionally specific issues. In 1925, Dr. Herbert Bankole-Bright, a member of the National Council of British West Africa (NCBWA) visited London with a pragmatic proposal for solving this problem.¹¹⁷ At a meeting of West Africans in London, he encouraged students to form a West African students' union modeled after the federal example of the NCBWA.

Though some felt that the movement to put West African unity before Pan-African unity constituted a sort of factionalist segregation that would damage the overarching interests of London-based students, Solanke immediately jumped on to the idea. In fact, he had been entertaining similar plans as early as 1923.¹¹⁸ According to Solanke, original inspiration for this project had come to him in a dream:

I had a long and most interesting dream one night during which Almighty God graciously revealed to me the following conclusion as a fundamental guide to my future national duties in life: that until Africans at home and abroad, including all persons of African descent, organize and develop the spirit of the principles of self-help, unity and cooperation among themselves, and fight it out to remove this

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

colour bar, they would have to continue to suffer the results of colour prejudice and remain hewers of wood and drawers of water for the other races of mankind... In grateful appreciation of what the Almighty God had thus disclosed to me, I at once decided to devote my life first of all towards seeing that the enunciated principles and objects set in that dream should be carried out.¹¹⁹

Despite the Pan-African undertones at work, this dream had inspired Solanke to focus on regionally specific projects—first the Nigerian Progress Union, now the West African Students' Union.

Whether Solanke actually had such a dream is irrelevant. His rhetorical use of divine revelation and the content of his concerns reveal two very important things. First, Solanke was a devout Christian. But just as West African peoples had long been doing at home and just as he had done in organizing the Nigerian Progress Union, Solanke selectively adapted and adopted Christianity to negotiate the circumstances of colonial rule. He used divine revelation to legitimize the origins of the WASU and orient his goals as transcending simple politics. Within this framework, the end of color prejudice was not simply one man's desire; it was divine will. In alluding to the injustice of racism within the context of a wider Christian humanism, Solanke effectively elicited the sympathies of European and African Christians alike, and defined an argument for both egalitarianism and nationalist politics. From its very beginnings, then, the movement toward West African unity located itself within a Christian moral framework and used the unquestionable virtue of Christian truth to legitimize West African social and political goals. A second item of note is that Solanke's dream cuts at the heart of racism and discrimination, specifically, rather than colonial rule. This conservatism was

¹¹⁹ Garigue, "The West African Students' Union," 56.

characteristic of African students' movements until the Second World War, a dynamic that will be addressed in further depth later on.

The Founding of the WASU

On August 7th, 1925, Solanke, Bankole-Bright, and a host of law students from across British West Africa authenticated the founding of the WASU.¹²⁰ JB Danquah was appointed president while Solanke became secretary-general, a post he would maintain for the next quarter of a century.¹²¹ Together, they crafted a constitution based on the following aims:

1. to provide and maintain a hostel for students of African descent;
2. to act as a bureau of information on African history, customs, law and institutions;
3. to act as a centre for research on all subjects appertaining to Africa and its developments;
4. to promote through regular contact a spirit of goodwill, better understanding and brotherhood between all persons of African descent and other races of mankind;
5. to present to the world a true picture of African life and philosophy, thereby making a definitely African contribution towards the progress of civilization;
6. to promote the spirit of self-help, unity and co-operation amongst its members;
7. to foster a spirit of national consciousness and racial pride amongst members;
8. to publish a monthly magazine called *Wasu*.¹²²

This list belies both the underlying concerns of the organization and the attitudes of its members. These revolved, in large part, around the logistics and specifics of a constructing a new West African national identity. Early documents surrounding the WASU reveal a national ideal balanced *between* African and European paradigms—

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 34.

¹²² *West Africa*, August 1925, 1002.

unabashedly African, yet economically and sociopolitically ‘modern’. Students sought a “synthesis of civilizations”:

Professor Alain Locke tells us that *the people who live in terms of the greatest synthesis of civilizations are going to be in the end the most efficient*. The African, therefore, having at his disposal the greatest possible variety of cultures—both the African indigenous and the European and American—it stands to reason that the greatest synthesis is within his reach, and the only way of realizing that synthesis, we believe, is by adopting the W.A.S.U. habit of thought... The W.A.S.U. says that our acquaintance with non-African societies and institutions must not induce us to destroy our native institutions, but rather give us hints as to methods whereby we may strengthen these institutions by *resort to indigenous materials*.¹²³

In order for this synthesis to become a reality, however, West African students would have to both legitimize African culture within the context of English society and outline a creative means for ‘modernizing’ West African politics. This mission was conveniently if subconsciously self-serving, as it stood to remedy the racism students encountered abroad while also preparing a political platform for West African intellectuals within the colonial structure.

While WASU members regularly participated in outreach activities, the most consistent means of asserting themselves and achieving these goals was through *Wasu*, the organization’s regular publication. The magazine took on such an important role that members ultimately declared it “the real spirit and life of the Union to the extent that if it ever ceases to issue it seems the Union must necessarily become dead.”¹²⁴ In its early years, the magazine covered issues ranging from biological racism to Yoruba marriage law, but its central concern was the concept of West African nationality. Contributors regularly reiterated the foundational and strongly nationalist goals of the organization—

¹²³ *Wasu* 8, January 1929, 2.

¹²⁴ *Wasu* 2:1, January 1933, 3.

self-help, unity, and cooperation. They decried racist myths as they set an agenda for West African ‘progress.’ Together, then, contributors used the *Wasu* to engage in the articulation and negotiation of the new national identity while at the same time defending African culture.

Through the magazine and otherwise, members of the WASU positioned themselves as the self-conscious ‘translators’ of Africa. Students likened themselves to the cultural ambassadors of West Africa, and began to speak regularly at meetings organized by London-based societies—primarily Christian societies—in order to promote cross-racial and cross-cultural understanding. The chosen name of the WASU actually means ‘preach’ in Yoruba, and students sought to do just that, preaching African cultural perspectives and political objectives as well as colonial responsibility to a Euro-Christian audience. As historian Philip Garigue has noted, “They used to point out to their audiences that the British people, and the white race as a whole, had a moral obligation to the Negroes, and especially to those in their colonies.”¹²⁵ This alleged ‘moral obligation’ stemmed from Christian theology, and was, in fact, the same ‘obligation’ that fueled the missionary movement. Christianity, then, continued to be a powerful rhetorical and physical medium for promoting cross-cultural goodwill and ongoing partnerships in the development of a West African nation.

Despite an evident desire to preserve African culture and decry racist myths, students of the WASU also showed a clear belief in teleological narratives of civilization and progress. In this civilizing spirit, early meetings featured arguments and debates over questions including:

¹²⁵ Garigue, “The West African Students’ Union,” 58.

the relations between native rulers and the African intellectuals; how the chiefs could further such education as would provide the persons needed to carry out the developments in the administrations headed by the chief; how the chiefs should themselves be educated in Western methods of local government; how the lawyers should codify native custom so that the native courts could function efficiently, and so on.¹²⁶

Students hoped to achieve these goals and more through full participation with the Colonial Office. As Solanke himself wrote in an early edition of *Wasu* “They [the Europeans] are our rulers, our teachers, and our spiritual guides.”¹²⁷ This contradiction between West African nationalism and colonial dependence reflects, as Adi notes, “the precarious position of the emergent bourgeoisie itself.”¹²⁸ This bourgeoisie, Adi goes on to explain, “was as yet too weak to end colonial rule and in some ways directly benefited from and was a product of the colonial system. But it was constantly thwarted in its attempts to assert itself politically, economically and socially and was therefore compelled to struggle against the conditions imposed by colonialism and sometimes colonial rule itself.”¹²⁹ Students’ aim, then, was not revolution, but Euro-Christian ‘progress’ as it would benefit the West African intelligentsia.

Aggrey House and the WASU Hostel

Given the widespread application of the ‘color bar’ and the consequent difficulties African students had encountered in securing accommodation, the primary goal of the WASU was to develop a self-directed hostel for African students. By 1927, the Colonial Office, too, had begun to officially recognize this need. Administrators worried that

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹²⁷ *Wasu* 1, March 1926, 14.

¹²⁸ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 37.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

future West African leaders were being alienated from the Empire by their experiences of racism, and they sought to engage in the organization and management of a facility that would protect students from these untoward influences.¹³⁰ But West African students resisted the idea of handing over their project to British authorities; besides the obvious practical benefits of this imagined 'home from home', the idea of an independent hostel also carried significant political weight. In proving that they could develop and maintain an African student's hostel by themselves, members of the WASU would also be making a defiant if subtle statement about African people's ability to self-govern.

Beyond being a statement about African ability, the imagined students' hostel would also provide a fertile and unmolested ground for the cultivation of the new West African identity. The concept of a United West Africa was relatively if not entirely new, and in order for such a union to come to fruition, West Africans would first have to develop a strong 'united front' based on a common politics. If this imagined nation were ever to be autonomous, this national consciousness would have to be born beyond the reach of the Colonial Office, who had their own interests in molding a West African elite. Students' unilateral directive in the hostel scheme, then, was paramount, and later disagreements between students and the Colonial Office about the management of the hostel developed out of these concerns.

Despite their suspicions and their desire to maintain autonomy, however, Solanke and others were willing to use the Colonial Office's support so long as it was on their own terms. When Major Hanns Vischer was appointed as a liaison between students and the government, WASU members took full advantage of his presence. Vischer spoke of

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-55.

the hostel as “a veritable home to which your people will look as something belonging to themselves and not as a charity,” thereby assuring students of the Colonial Office’s willingness to provide financial assistance and leave the rest to the students.¹³¹ But this narrative was not entirely true. Vischer and his coworkers recognized the importance of maintaining a hand in WASU affairs. As he was promising autonomy to students of the WASU, Vischer also worked to develop a hostel committee composed of European missionaries, commercial interests, and retired colonial officials. These representatives would be responsible for organizing and raising funds for the hostel.

Students, however, grew wary once they learned of Vischer’s plan. In 1929, in order to guarantee the principle of ‘self-help,’ they elected to send Solanke on a fund raising mission to Britain’s West African territories.¹³² For the next three years, Solanke toured all four British West African territories (Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Gambia). Though he spent the majority of his time in Nigeria, Solanke spoke in every major town. He enlisted the help of prominent individuals in order to organize meetings at which they addressed the issue of West African nationalism and appealed for hostel funds. Often, the prominent individuals who helped Solanke to organize these meetings were connected in some way to the Christian church. This was not unusual, as the relationship between the church and the school meant that local intellectuals were almost inevitably linked to the missions. Their contributions, however, were often more nationalist than religious in tone. Reverend M.S. Cole, the principal of Oduduwa College, spoke at the fifth anniversary of the WASU in Nigeria, noting, “The Union looks beyond the broadest differences of race and civilization to the national life of West

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 42.

Africa... surely God has some purpose and a place for Africans in his wonderful creation.”¹³³ Reverend S.O. Odutola adopted a more radical attitude, addressing the audience as “my dear fellow nationalists” and asserting, “no right thinking African will acquiesce in white domination and exploitation.”¹³⁴ In West Africa, then, individuals continued to reappropriate the intellectual and moral weight of Christianity as a platform for the development of a West African national consciousness.

These meetings of intellectuals and political elites often precipitated the development of local WASU branches. Though many local developments were short-lived, some continued to host talks and lectures even after Solanke had returned to London. WASU members in London would join and reinforce these branches after returning from their studies, and in this way a lasting international connection was established. But despite this burgeoning web of cooperation, the individuals involved in WASU activities both at home and abroad were all members of an elite West African bourgeoisie. In this sense, the internationalization of the WASU was basically superficial, as it failed to penetrate social class divisions.

Though it may not have transcended social categories, however, it did impact the politics of London-based students in significant ways. As political organizations in West Africa were expanding, so was the movement growing in London. While the primary concern of the WASU had focused on racism and the color bar, the introduction of international elements highlighted the failures and aggressions of colonial rule on a locally specific basis. This began a gradual focal shift toward the underlying paradox of

¹³³ *The Nigerian Daily Telegraph*, August 1930. Quoted from Garigue, “The West African Students’ Union,” 59.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

colonialism, an awareness that would take shape in the 1930s and culminate during the Second World War. Likewise, Solanke's presence in West Africa "stimulated a lively debate in the local press over the question of the students' hostel, racism in Britain and other topical issues."¹³⁵ Though the international exchange facilitated by Solanke's fundraising mission may have been limited to a class of elite intellectuals, then, it also inspired a new political awareness in both West African and London and created an important network of political ties.

Solanke returned to London in 1932 with £1,500 in funds for the new hostel.¹³⁶ This was far less than the £4,000 the students had anticipated, but the Union would still be able to cover the necessary expenses of a hostel for at least a few months. In January of 1933, students secured a three-story, eighteen-bedroom center at Camden Road.¹³⁷ In order for the hostel to survive, however, WASU students would have to solicit additional aid from the Colonial Office. This quickly became the subject of intense conflict. Following Solanke's departure in 1929, the Colonial Office had pressed on with their own hostel initiative in secret. They developed the plans for a center called Aggrey House, and directed all of their finances towards this project instead of the WASU since, "the students [of the WASU] would not contemplate any form of Government control—even remote" and it was believed that the WASU hostel "is likely to be used to further their political aims."¹³⁸ In March 1932, the Colonial Office—in partnership with the Christian, Jamaican born Harold Moody and the association he had founded, the League

¹³⁵ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 56.

¹³⁶ Garigue, "The West African Students' Union," 58.

¹³⁷ *Wasu* 2:1, January 1933, 5.

¹³⁸ The National Archives, inter-office memo from 1933, CO 323/1243/7.

of Coloured Peoples—announced an intention to open the Aggrey House hostel within six months.¹³⁹

The Colonial Office's hostel plan inspired outrage among West African students both in London and abroad. Throughout West Africa, local papers criticized Aggrey House as “another attempt to slow down the development of nationalism.”¹⁴⁰ In London, WASU students published a small pamphlet called *The Truth about Aggrey House—An Exposure of the Government Plan for Control of African Students in Great Britain*. The pamphlet denounced the Colonial Office, and warned that Aggrey House was part of a wider Government plot to stamp out nationalism and control any opinions that might be “contrary to the prolonged existence of capitalist oppression in the Colonies.”¹⁴¹ It asked all ‘lovers of freedom’ “to help us check this scheme of Imperialism which would strangle the very thought of its subjects and control their every action and opinion.”¹⁴² Though not a year earlier cooperation with the British government had been heralded as central to the WASU's success strategy, the Aggrey House fiasco was experienced as a direct assault on West African national sovereignty. It polarized the WASU's political standpoint and, like the Empire Exhibition of 1923, served as a rallying point for international West African unity.

The Aggrey House conflict coincided with the beginnings of a deep and enduring critique of Western society. While this criticism was influenced by hostel concerns, it was not limited to them; the Aggrey House debate became an outlet of sorts for general

¹³⁹ Aggrey was an important missionary and intellectual from the Gold Coast.

¹⁴⁰ Garigue, “The West African Students' Union,” 60.

¹⁴¹ *Truth About Aggrey House*. Quoted from Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 59.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

frustration with European racism, economic exploitation, and international political policy. During the spring of 1933, *Wasu* began to regularly feature a column called “Around the ‘Civilised’ Countries” which reported on anti-Semitic developments in Germany as well as political fiascos and human rights infringements committed by Europeans throughout the rest of the world. While these events brought Western claims to morality and civilization into question, the Great Depression sparked doubts about the teleological nature of progress and the inevitability of capitalism. The spike in Western poverty that grew out of the Depression further enlivened debates around Marxism and Communism, and some contributors began to wonder whether ‘civilization’ was even worth saving.

Within this increasingly polarized context, university students were not the only West Africans demanding increased sovereignty; West African churches, too, had begun the process of breaking off from European control. As early as 1932, West Africans aspired to develop an independent bishopric.¹⁴³ This project grew out of the nationalist ‘self-help’ principles that inspired the development of the WASU itself, and *Wasu* began to follow and support the movement. Issues of the magazine from 1933 feature not only a discussion of the bishopric, but also commentary that links the need for an independent African Church to a burgeoning desire for national education systems.¹⁴⁴ One article even explores the Yoruba impression of God as parallel to European conceptions of the Supreme Being, thereby validating a West African claim to monotheism that actually pre-dates Christianity. As the conditions of racism and colonialism became more palpable, then, West Africans continued to adopt and adapt practical and ideological tools from

¹⁴³ *Wasu* 2:2, April-June 1933, 51.

¹⁴⁴ *Wasu* 2:2, April-June 1933, 34.

across the Euro-Christian cultural paradigm in order to justify and support the movement towards West African nationalism.

Despite this burgeoning nationalism, however, and despite Aggrey House's role as a vessel for unity, the Aggrey House conflict also became the impetus for divisions within the Union. Personality clashes and national fractures that developed out of the stresses of the situation had begun to wear relationships thin. Students from the Gold Coast, particularly, were upset with Solanke's leadership, and ultimately all but one quit the WASU for Aggrey House.¹⁴⁵ WASU found itself in a dire financial position, and though the organization continued to stubbornly resist the influences of Aggrey House and the Colonial Office, by the end of 1935 impending bankruptcy had forced the students' hand.

As a representative of the Colonial Office, Vischer agreed to "help put the Union on a sound financial basis, chair a committee of reorganisation, ... and secure the financial assistance of West African governments."¹⁴⁶ Thus relieved, the WASU began a policy of cooperation with Aggrey House and the Colonial Office. This was also a relief for the Colonial Office. Within the increasingly radical political context of the mid-1930s, Vischer reminded his fellows that they must get WASU "into the Aggrey House scheme on the side of the Government, otherwise I fear it will again be used as a centre of anti-government activity and intrigue."¹⁴⁷ In their desperation, the WASU also began to turn to other sources of funding—sources that tempered their radical politics and, some would argue, disrupted the integrity of the Union. After receiving a £40 donation from

¹⁴⁵ Garigue, "The West African Students' Union," 60.

¹⁴⁶ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 66.

¹⁴⁷ The National Archives, Vischer to Downie on January 4, 1937, CO 847/7/2.

the United Africa Company, for example, *Wasu* praised the definitively imperialist organization as “a company whose primary concern might be trade, but who had ‘directly or indirectly contributed through their method of trading much toward the progress of civilization among the masses of the native inhabitants of British West Africa.’”¹⁴⁸

Financial difficulties, then, forced the WASU to rely on the very organizations they had already spent so much energy deriding. By 1937, with the help of the Colonial Office and a Christian organization called the Committee for the Welfare of Africans in Europe, students were able to purchase a new house in Camden Square that guaranteed the continued life of the WASU. “For the first time in its history,” Garigue notes, “the Union was solvent.”¹⁴⁹

While some would understand this position as paradoxical or even hypocritical, it can also be understood as an extension of the sort of utilitarian survival tactics employed by West Africans throughout the colonies. West African colonials were undeniably subject to racism and oppression as a result of colonial rule; the adoption and adaptation of the tools of the colonial paradigm—Christianity and education specifically—served as a means of negotiating the conditions of this oppression and securing the most individual benefit and political leverage. The WASU, if it were successful, would allow for *significant* benefit and leverage both among the students in Britain and for the African bourgeoisie at home in West Africa. If it failed, on the other hand, students worried that “the hands of progress will be put centuries backward.”¹⁵⁰ Solanke and other members of the WASU, then, “did not feel that there was anything contradictory about accepting

¹⁴⁸ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 66.

¹⁴⁹ Garigue, “The West African Students’ Union,” 61.

¹⁵⁰ *Wasu* 4:3, September 1935, 35.

money from those they might refer to as ‘British Imperialists.’”¹⁵¹ Negotiation ensured survival, thus the ends outweighed the means. Students’ liminal positioning therefore allowed a fluidity in which they could manipulate resources, weigh options, and even entertain paradox without succumbing to paralyzing ambivalence.

The Italo-Ethiopian War and the Quest for a ‘Black United Front’

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 marked an important point in the history of the WASU. One of the first aggressions of the Second World War, the Ethiopian invasion garnered wide scale protests and universal condemnation. Many African, African-American, and Caribbean peoples, particularly, saw the invasion—and the League of Nations failure to prevent it—as a betrayal of the black race.¹⁵² Ethiopia had long been treated as a symbol for independent Africa, and students across Britain felt an attack on Ethiopia as an attack on their own sovereignty. Opposition to the Italian invasion, then, “created the conditions for greater unity between many of the organisations in Britain.”¹⁵³

Weakened by financial difficulties and the split with Aggrey House, the WASU had only just begun to recover. The Italian invasion, however, gave the students renewed vigor and energy. They quickly formed an Ethiopia Defense Committee, whose members coordinated with other students across London to protest Italy’s actions.¹⁵⁴ This search for a ‘Black United Front’ both pushed the WASU towards an increasingly anti-imperial, anti-fascist, left wing politics and helped to repair some of the relationships that had been

¹⁵¹ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 67.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ Garigue, “The West African Students’ Union,” 62.

damaged during the Aggrey House conflict. “The Ethiopian disaster,” students noted, “may yet prove a blessing in disguise if it succeeds in uniting the black peoples of the world.”¹⁵⁵

Beyond becoming the impetus for Pan-African collectivization and unity, the attack on Ethiopia also brought the question of colonialism into the moral and political limelight. Italy’s demands for colonies and its forceful methods of attaining them were not so unlike British policy. The British Empire, then, was brought under scrutiny and forced to justify its very existence as students began to capitalize on the fact that “the Western Powers are not in Africa for the African’s good.”¹⁵⁶ Within the perspective afforded by the Ethiopian invasion, colonialism became a moral as well as a political issue. Though initially justified on the basis of the civilizing mission and the white man’s burden, students began to condemn European colonialism as evidence of “the spiritual bankruptcy of the West.”¹⁵⁷ The WASU highlighted this bankruptcy through their own devotion. They began to hold religious services at the Hostel that combined the moral and political concerns of the Union and sought to invoke divine intervention in Ethiopia.¹⁵⁸ By 1937, West African students were beginning to wonder whether it was time for “Africans to start thinking of sending missionaries to Europe to humanise the natives.”¹⁵⁹ This reappropriation of the civilizing mission subverted the terms of British authority while confirming West Africa’s moral and political right to sovereignty.

¹⁵⁵ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 70.

¹⁵⁶ *Wasu* 4:3, September 1935, 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Wasu* 4:5, November 1935, 71.

¹⁵⁸ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 69.

¹⁵⁹ *Wasu* 6:1, January 1937, 29.

III. REAPPROPRIATING CIVILIZATION AND COMMERCE: THE WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS' UNION (1939-1960)

The outbreak of World War II wrought irreversible changes across Europe, and West African students in the midst of this crisis did not go unaffected. The flow of people, ideas, and technologies facilitated by wartime mobilization accelerated the pace and increased the forms of Afro-European contact on an unprecedented scale, and as Britain was demystified and demoralized, the myth of European supremacy so central to the stability of the British colonial system was also eroding. Though pre-war attempts at assimilation and critique tended to hinge upon a dialogue of Christianity—and, as war approached, democratic civilization—the conditions of World War II polarized and crystallized this focus. Rather than championing equality or deriding European hypocrisy through the vehicle of Christian morality, then, students increasingly began to criticize the violent and hypocritical failures of the ‘civilized’ world. Thus, while students continued to use the ideological and material resources afforded by Christianity in order to negotiate advantage within the colonial paradigm, with the Second World war *democratic civilization* became the most relevant category of subversion among students of the WASU.

Yet, confronted with what seemed to be a choice between the lesser of two evils, students of the WASU generally continued to support the Crown. As Solanke confided in a letter to a friend, “WASU have found that the English are the best of all the other European ‘SHARKS’ in Africa... We Africans must cast our lot with theirs in order to be saved.”¹⁶⁰ Throughout the course of the war, then, West African students maintained a

¹⁶⁰ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 90.

sense of Allied cooperation. The end of the war, however, wrought yet another shift in WASU's strategy. Eager, now, for the self-rule so championed by the Allied Forces and disappointed by the British Government's failure to fulfill its promises to the West African people, students of the WASU began to raise their voices as part of an international protest cry by colonized peoples. While the tenets of democracy still played a role in students' demands, the WASU's post-war rhetoric was also radicalized by the adoption and adaptation of the terms of *commerce*. Students increasingly pushed past the alleged moral and political goals of colonialism, epitomized in the categories of Christianity and civilization, to attack the colonial regime's economic center. Fueled by the burgeoning Labour movement as well as the expanding political influence of the Soviet Union, students of the WASU used the terms of Marxism and Communism in order to negotiate sociopolitical power. The Cold War tensions between capitalism and communism thus introduced an economic playing field that students were able to manipulate to their own, nationalistic ends.

This chapter explores students' reappropriation of the terms of civilization and commerce between the outbreak of World War II and the beginning of West African independence. The first section focuses on World War II specifically, while the second explores the new dynamics that arose during the Cold War.

WORLD WAR II (1939-1945)

The conditions of the Second World War divided the globe into two irreconcilable halves; that which outwardly aligned itself with the Enlightenment principles of freedom and democracy, and that which sought total domination through authoritarian, fascist

rule. This international binary at once highlighted the hypocritical shortcomings of the British Empire and created a tight alliance between Britain and its colonies. Though World War II provided a solid ideological basis for colonial independence, then, it also introduced a wartime dichotomy between ‘freedom’ and ‘un-freedom,’ which placed West Africans and British peoples firmly in the same camp. The activities and opinions of the WASU throughout the Second World War reflect West African students’ precarious positioning within this paradoxical Third Space.

Paradoxical Propaganda: Democracy and Racism

The circumstances of the war altered both the conditions of colonial rule abroad and the status of West African students in Britain. In West Africa, the British spread democratic propaganda and affirmed the need for increased ‘partnership’ in the colonies. Though aimed at mobilizing West Africans for the war effort, these materials had a dual effect. On the one hand, propaganda “strengthened the African sense of belonging to the British Empire and fostered some form of imperial idealism at a time of growing local opposition to colonial rule.”¹⁶¹ West Africans were eager to prove themselves as dedicated and respectable citizens of Empire, and the government readily enlisted the help of colonial subjects from across the Black Atlantic. Thousands of recruits came to Britain in order to serve in the armed forces or work in British war industries.¹⁶² Students and other colonial subjects, especially those in London during the bombings of 1940 and 1941, experienced the war in a way that created an unprecedented cohesion and unity

¹⁶¹ Bonny Ibhawoh, “Second World War Propaganda, Imperialism and Anti-Colonial Nationalism in British West Africa,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16 (2002): 223.

¹⁶² Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 89.

among all members of the Allied Forces. Thus the propaganda disseminated by the British and the immediate experience of the war united the democratic world—and, ironically, its colonies—against a common enemy.

At the same time, however, British propaganda articulated forms of Western liberalism that were paradoxically opposed to the actual political conditions of colonial rule. Britain's dispersion of democratic rhetoric thus fueled a widespread public awareness around the liberal shortcomings of colonialism. The West African public—like the subject peoples of many other British colonies—began to voice a desire for post-war sovereignty, a desire buoyed by British promises. As colonial governor Bernard Bourdillon assured the Nigerian public, “the victory of Democracy is going to make [British] Democracy more democratic.”¹⁶³ Beyond inspiring the West African public, the propagation of democratic propaganda also gave West African elites at home and in Europe a platform to express their nationalist demands in a language characterized by popularized discourses of freedom and self-determination. Elites capitalized upon the inherent hypocrisy of British propaganda in order to make more forward demands than ever before; the paradox, after all, of the world's most widespread colonial Empire demanding the aid of colonized peoples in defending *against* the invasion of a hostile foreign power was acute. Thus imperial war propaganda both garnered colonial aid and contributed to a growing movement designed to ensure that major changes would occur in the colonies at the conclusion of the war.

As political circumstances raised questions around democracy, racial claims of Aryan supremacists heightened the discourse in Europe and abroad surrounding issues of

¹⁶³ The National Archives, sourced from un-cited newspaper, CO 554/127/11B.

race equality. The extreme racial nationalism, imperial ambition, and anti-Semitism that fueled Hitler's campaign forced the question of racial discrimination into the public domain. This discussion translated into a platform for colonial mobilization; as Adi explains, "In a war ostensibly fought against the doctrines of racial hatred, the British and Allied governments had to convince the colonies that they held the moral high ground."¹⁶⁴ Despite this burgeoning discourse, however, racism and the color bar continued to be a serious issue for those who came Britain. In fact, racial anxieties actually increased with the sudden influx of black workers and servicemen to the metropole. Though eager to contribute to the war cause, black colonial subjects who served with the British often faced invisibility if not outright belittlement and discrimination. Some black volunteers were even barred from service on the basis of race. Of notable account is the exclusion of Reverend E.N. Jones, a leading member of the WASU, who was dismissed from his position as a stretcher-bearer after other volunteers complained about being in the company of a black man.¹⁶⁵ Thus the ideological dialogues that fueled the war—namely democracy and racial equality—plainly contradicted the unequal treatment of black peoples in Britain while also fueling colonial contributions to the war effort.

Changing Relationships: WASU and the Colonial Office

The concerns of the Second World War enhanced and popularized British notions of Western liberalism while at the same time highlighting Britain's failure to abide by these very ideologies. Colonial subjects were left in a strange position—in order to

¹⁶⁴ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 106.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

defend these ideologies on an international level, they would have to support Britain; in order to secure the practice of these policies on their own soil, however, they would have to oppose the Empire. Britain's propaganda and wartime dependence on colonial support, alternately, introduced new forms of awareness and political leverage among colonial subjects. Within this paradoxical context, students of the WASU began to manipulate and negotiate their relationship with the Colonial Office in the hopes of securing maximum advantage. Advantage for the WASU, however, did not always translate to the advantage of all West African peoples, and agreements were hard-won.

During World War II, West African students in London became an "important barometer of colonial opinion."¹⁶⁶ Barometric readings, in some cases, were not at all to the Colonial Office's liking. The Aggrey House, the Colonial Office's own controversial project for moderating West African dissent, became especially suspect. In 1940 Hanns Vischer began to worry, "From all I can see and from all I hear Aggrey House is becoming known as a centre for subversion and definitely anti-allied propaganda."¹⁶⁷ In May, then, to protests and outrage, the Colonial Office closed Aggrey House. While they cited the 'immoral conduct' of one of the members as the reason for this closure, Aggrey House trustees and members of the Colonial Office privately admitted, "It was thought better to raise the moral rather than the political issue."¹⁶⁸ Despite the closure of the Aggrey House, however, the need for an African hostel was still widely recognized. The Colonial Office thus turned their attentions and support to the WASU's Africa House. Membership became increasingly Pan-African, as students and service members from

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶⁷ The National Archives, Vischer to JL Keith, April 17 (1940), CO 859/21/1.

¹⁶⁸ The National Archives, J.L. Keith notes, June 26 (1940), CO 859/21/1.

across the Black Atlantic began to use the WASU as a hostel, social center, and bureau of information.

As the only hostel in London for students of African descent, the WASU's ties to the Colonial Office also developed. This positioning played into the ultimate paradox of the Second World War. Though the WASU understood itself as becoming increasingly politicized towards the cause of democracy and egalitarianism, it also supported the war effort and depended heavily on the Colonial Office for financing. Student politics tended to mirror colonial policy, and many of the WASU's demands were favorably viewed as a "significant indication of the trend of Europeanised native opinion."¹⁶⁹ While Colonial Officials internally agreed that the WASU's economic and political demands did not warrant an official response—they were a student body, not a political one—the student group's positioning ultimately won ongoing recognition from the Colonial Office. Influential Government ministers and Colonial Officials began to pay visits to Africa House, and students were careful to use these meetings not only as a forum for building positive relationships but also as a platform to request additional finances and discuss political concerns.

Meanwhile, in order to ensure financial stability, the Union became a Limited Liability Company with a board of directors made up of Europeans and Africans alike.¹⁷⁰ This split the organization between a conservative board concerned primarily with finances, and a liberal, even radical, student body. Though Solanke, a member of the board, made it a point that neither party should influence or attempt to control the other, the radicalization of the Cold War years brought these two halves into conflict. Besides

¹⁶⁹ The National Archives, inter-office memo, November 1 (1941), CO 554/130/7

¹⁷⁰ Garigue, "The West African Students' Union," 63.

establishing itself as a corporate body, the WASU also joined forces with a missionary council known as the Dean of Westminster's Committee. Because many students were nominally Christian, the Church hoped that they might work with and through WASU to ensure the co-operation of West Africa's future leaders with Christian England's aims, counter the effects of racism, and reassert a waning influence among the West African elite.¹⁷¹ In 1944, the Dean of Westminster's Committee agreed to help the WASU raise funds for a new hostel—one that would include both a chapel and a live-in chaplain.¹⁷² In order to prevent total dependence on the Dean of Westminster's committee, Solanke arranged a second fundraising trip to West Africa. Given the increased cooperation, financial dependence, and structural reform of the war years, then, the Colonial Office and its Christian emissaries overwhelmingly began to perceive the WASU as a partner in colonial management rather than a subversive threat.

Conflicted Interests: Political Visions for a Changing West Africa

In spite of this corroboration, the WASU increasingly presented itself as a political voice not only for students in London but also for West African peoples in the colonies. They turned their government contacts into “an authoritative position from which to speak on West African affairs.”¹⁷³ This assumption of representative duties, however, was problematic. While some of their petitions, notably those that catered to economic concerns, were widely popular, others introduced a disconnect between WASU politics and actual West African demands. Memoranda crafted during the WASU's

¹⁷¹ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 113.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Garigue, “The West African Students' Union,” 63.

Conference on African Problems, particularly, evoked controversy. Though the conference advocated the extension of democracy to the colonies, some West Africans at home received it unfavorably.

This tension became particularly evident in the conflict that emerged between members of the WASU and a body of chieftains from Northern Nigeria. The WASU Conference memorandum targeted Nigeria, specifically, and included an extended plan to modify West African systems of governance. Among their demands were political clauses calling for increased African representation in institutions of government and the formation of a West African constitution based on a federal system of rule; economic articles requesting the introduction of a minimum wage, the reintroduction of common land rights, and the improvement of economic conditions through welfare and development projects; and social mandates that English be taught in all schools and that monogamy replace the “diverse forms of marriage” practiced in the colonies.¹⁷⁴ The WASU’s resolution also posited, “Appointments of chiefs, district heads, etc. should be by character, education, merits and capacity,” and that political representatives “should be replaced by those trained at a recognised School of Law.”¹⁷⁵ The WASU, then, used the liberal propaganda and the critical positioning afforded by World War II to demand increased self-government from the Colonial Office—though self-government, notably, in which the Western educated elite would necessarily occupy privileged positions of authority.

Nigerian chieftains, however, benefited from the status quo, and the WASU’s proposal presented a threat to their authority. In their response, the Nigerian chieftains

¹⁷⁴ The National Archives, CO 554/127/11.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

argued that West Africa was not ready for increased sovereignty, that the WASU's proposals for a constitutional government based on the British model were ill suited to Nigerian custom, and that the WASU had no business meddling in the affairs of a distant people whose traditions they did not understand. They accused WASU members of ignorance and affirmed the need for ongoing English support in the colonies, noting "The more we progress, the more we require the help of Europeans, because to withdraw them is like ... a school boy who has finished his Middle School education to say he has no need of further instruction."¹⁷⁶ The Northern Nigerian chieftains ultimately concluded that the WASU was "more concerned to benefit themselves than to benefit other people" and chided, "If this kind of Self-interest and Self-seeking is not uprooted from the hearts of Africans, how can they imagine that they are capable of exercising control over their fellows?"¹⁷⁷

Empowered by the colonial system, Nigerian chieftains saw the WASU's progressive political stance as a threat both to 'traditional' customs and to their own power. From their perspective, members of the WASU were ignorant, disconnected children with less right even than the British to meddle in West African politics. Among members of the WASU, alternately, the old guard of Nigerian rule was believed to be too conservative, too corrupt, and too rooted in their ways to maintain their authority for long. The world was changing, Europe was falling apart, and the time to emancipate West Africa was drawing near. While both parties undeniably had self-serving interests in mind, both also had one eye on the wellbeing of West Africa's future. The paradoxical role of democratic rhetoric during World War II, then, was compounded by the

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

paradoxical role of the West African elite in new bids for West African sovereignty. The West African independence that many were daring to imagine would inevitably unleash all sorts of new conflicts—who was most suited to rule? What role would European ideas and institutions have in the crafting of a new West Africa? How would ‘modernity’ successfully compromise with ‘tradition’? Was sovereignty even what the people wanted?

In spite of these conflicted interests, during the spring of 1942 the democratic discourse fueled by wartime propaganda erupted into the WASU’s first official demand for self-government. On April 4, students presented a Resolution to the Colonial Government stating:

In the interests of freedom, justice, and Democracy, and in view of the lessons of Malaya and Burma as well as the obvious need of giving Empire peoples something to fight for, WASU urges the British Government to grant the Colonies INTERNAL SELF-GOVERNMENT NOW, with a DEFINITE GUARANTEE OF COMPLETE SELF-GOVERNMENT WITHIN FIVE YEARS AFTER THE WAR.¹⁷⁸

Students further warned the Prime Minister, “Only a realistic approach and a generous gesture to Africans now can save the Empire from collapse.”¹⁷⁹ Though WASU members in the decade before World War II had limited their aims to fostering a body of “Africans for Africa” and denounced the so-called “parrot cry of Africa for Africans,” the circumstances of World War II propelled their aspirations to new heights while at the same time increasing their political leverage.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ The National Archives, sourced from un-cited newspaper, April 17 (1942), CO 554/127/11B.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Wasu* 6:2, 1937, 22.

Nevertheless, the Colonial Office gave little immediate attention to this radical declaration. Internal disagreement about the legitimacy of the declaration paired with the close relationship between the WASU and the Colonial Office meant that their words constituted no real threat. As colonial official JL Keith noted, “This sort of talk... gives members of the WASU a good deal of pleasures; but I think that they are quite aware that the colonial office and the Colonial Governments are not likely to take their advice in the matter and that they have no mandate from their own people to make representations of this kind.”¹⁸¹ In any case, the war was the first priority on everyone’s mind, and students and officials alike understood that any change was unlikely to occur until after Hitler had been defeated. The circumstances of war, then, inspired demands for independence while also undermining the immediacy of West African claims to sovereignty.

EMERGING INDEPENDENCE (1945-1957)

Political Radicalization in the Post-War Era

The WASU’s demands for independence may not have been taken very seriously during the war years, but once the war came to a close the international political climate of the Cold War fueled both the legitimacy and viability of students’ calls for self-government. This was made possible, first, by an increased presence of colonial students in the metropole. With the end of the war and the implementation of ‘Africanization’ policies, increasing numbers of colonial students began to flock to Britain. Many of the new students had served in the armed or civil service during the war, and experience as well as education had taught them the inequalities of Empire. As such, they tended to be

¹⁸¹ The National Archives, JL Keith, Aug. 28 (1940), CO 859/21/3.

globally informed, politically ambitious, and strongly nationalistic. Meanwhile, colonial subjects across the diaspora were becoming increasingly frustrated with the government's failure to fulfill wartime promises. Life in the colonies was becoming very difficult, and colonial subjects had nothing to show for the sacrifices they had made in the name of democracy. Radical measures, then, seemed necessary in order to bring an end to colonial rule. As one *Wasu* contributor warned, "The Colonial peoples throughout the world, so long held down under a system reared on avarice and pretence, are now happily awakening to the reality of their plight... so let tyrants take note and beware."¹⁸²

Confronted by culture shock, racism, and the color bar, many African students were drawn to the WASU, and membership rose from just over 100 to nearly 1000.¹⁸³ Circulation of *Wasu* likewise expanded, and by March of 1945 the magazine was printing and distributing nearly 3,000 copies per publication.¹⁸⁴ This sudden growth coincided with the weakening of ties between the WASU and the Colonial Office. In 1944, Hanns Vischer, the Colonial Office's trusted medium between the students and the government, died of sudden illness. That same year, Solanke, another 'bridge' between the WASU and the Colonial Office, departed on a second fundraising tour of West Africa. Though the Colonial Office had long held Solanke responsible for controlling the radical tendencies of WASU students, his four-year absence allowed for 'unfavorable' influences to develop among the students.

Though most evident during the post-war era, this tendency towards radicalization actually began during the war. It was then that the Conservatives, as represented by the

¹⁸² *Wasu* 7:2, March 1946, 3.

¹⁸³ Garigue, "The West African Students' Union," 64.

¹⁸⁴ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 122.

Churchill administration, belied their intentions to “hold what we have” in terms of the British Empire.¹⁸⁵ Following disastrous disappointments around the Atlantic Charter (Churchill belatedly asserted that the promise to ‘restore self-government to those nations deprived of it’ applied only to Nazi-occupied Europe) and the government’s silence around Colonial contribution to the war efforts, students of the WASU overwhelmingly transferred their allegiances to the British Labour Party. Though regarded by many as “the less harmful of two evils,” West African students appreciated the Labour Party’s working-class ethic and colonial sympathies.¹⁸⁶ Labour Party MP’s began to cooperate with the WASU, and made a constant effort to reaffirm the need for democracy and self-governance. After the Labor Party’s overwhelming victory against in the Conservatives in 1945, however, *Wasu* advised, “The Labour Party has a moral obligation to itself not to stop at making bare promises.”¹⁸⁷

Marxism and Communism

Unfortunately, the Labour Party’s promises proved to be bare after all. In spite of the liberal rhetoric they bandied about during the war, the Labour Party’s colonial policy was actually quite similar to the paternalism practiced by Churchill’s Conservative administration. In a policy statement from 1943, the Labour Party concluded, “For a considerable time to come [colonial] peoples will not be ready for self-government.”¹⁸⁸

Disillusioned again and inspired by the apparent success of the Soviet Union, the political

¹⁸⁵ *Wasu* 7:2, March 1946, 19.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸⁸ *The Colonies: The Labour Party’s Post-War Policy for the African and Pacific Colonies*, (Transport House: London, 1943), 2.

bent of the post-war wave of student activism shifted towards an anti-colonial absolutism marked by Communist and Marxist influences. Here was a valid form of modern ‘civilization’ that recognized and alleviated the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed, that stressed equality and fraternity over class status, and that (theoretically) transcended racial boundaries. In contrast to capitalist understandings of the free market—an analysis that painted colonialism as ‘natural’ and necessary in the expansion of global trade—Marx’s dialectical materialism posed the ultimate *erosion* of colonialism as the natural order of history. Though economic injustice had long been a platform for colonial critique, in the wake of the Second World War, Marxism became a powerful and persuasive medium for dialogues of discord.

A surge of conferences and meetings at the end of the Second World War both facilitated the spread of Marxist-influenced anti-colonial attitudes and affirmed its emerging predominance. The Manchester Pan-African Conference of 1945, particularly, “showed how the unity of Pan-Africanism was now based around the analyses and language of the movement’s Marxist wing.”¹⁸⁹ Though earlier Pan-African Conferences had been restricted to intellectuals and political elites, the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Conference sought to engage cooperation with the working class as well. Participants published a *Manifesto on Africa in the Post-War World* calling for economic, social, and political development in Africa, as well as self-government and an end to foreign exploitation.¹⁹⁰ The *Manifesto* created a sense of unity within the Pan-African movement that crossed oceans as it bridged social class divides. As Kwame Nkrumah wrote, “Today there is only one road to effective action—the organization of the masses. And in

¹⁸⁹ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 128.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

that organization the educated Colonials must join.”¹⁹¹ Inspired, particularly, by leaders like Nkrumah, the conference fostered a militant optimism around the notion of an impending nationalism and recognized that force may be necessary in achieving such a goal. Ultimately, the networks established through the Manchester Pan-African Conference sparked a number of successful strikes and boycotts throughout the colonies that leveraged significant economic pressure against the Colonial Office.

Post-war gatherings, however, were not limited to Pan-African concerns. Other landmark rendezvous included the International World Youth Council’s conferences in London and Prague as well as a series of Subject Peoples Conferences dedicated to discussing “the present condition of the subject world” and organizing “the setting-up of some permanent organisation for the co-ordination of the Colonial struggle.”¹⁹² Speakers widely applied Marxist language in order to condemn colonialism and assert the need for a unified *global* front in the battle for national independence. During the mid to late 1940s, then, localized sympathies began to broaden to encompass a more inclusive discourse of Afro-Asian unity and even Third World Internationalism. Thus common colonial exploitation became the cause for collective international cooperation in the shadow of the Second World War.

It must be noted, however, that while Marxism was a *vehicle* for collectivism across the Pan-African and Afro-Asian movements, few colonial subjects actually identified as Communists. In this sense, subject peoples—and members of the WASU, specifically—manipulated the ideological terms of Communism and the immediate benefits offered by the Communist party in order to negotiate advantage within the

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 126.

colonial paradigm. In fact, as Adi notes, “many ... ‘communist’ students became as ‘bourgeois in Lagos’ as they had been ‘proletarian in London’.”¹⁹³ Despite accusations of Communist affiliations, then, national independence rather than Communist revolution was the ultimate goal. The Colonial Office itself recognized this fact when, in light of an undercover investigation into the affairs of WASU alumni Kojo Botsio, Kirby Green noted, “[the WASU’s] contact with communist organisations in the past was the natural desire to obtain assistance in the ‘nationalist’ struggle from any and every possible source.”¹⁹⁴ Though earlier student critiques of colonialism tended to subvert European dialogues of Christianity and civilization, then, the Marxist attitudes of the post-war period mark the emergence of a strong *economic* critique of the colonial project. Members of the WASU adopted and adapted Communism in order to articulate a platform and manipulate advantage amidst the early tensions of the Cold War.

Fragmentation and Synthesis: The West African National Secretariat

Though the influx of students and the radicalization of colonial politics served, in many ways, to empower the WASU, it also opened new fissures in the student body. National and political tensions within the hostel and ongoing financial difficulties undermined student solidarity. Solanke’s absence, too, contributed to factionalization within the WASU. Upon his return to London in 1948, Solanke condemned the political changes he saw in the WASU. Though largely sidelined during his (unsuccessful) 4-year sojourn in West Africa, Solanke demanded that his power be reinstated, and attempted to use the student’s communist affiliations and growing unpopularity among the Colonial

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Office to his own advantage. He argued that he alone could contain the unfavorable influences within the organization. In a personal letter to his friend Robert Wellesley Cole, however, Solanke confided, “My main trouble has been the difficulty of getting the present young and inexperienced students who are members of WASU to cooperate with me as I expected since my return from West Africa. In fact, it appears certain white people are not encouraging them secretly against me.”¹⁹⁵ By this time Solanke was already an old man, and his conservative approach to student politics, his persistent use of Christian values as a means of negotiating advantage, were relics of a past era of political engagement. Despite his unpopularity, however, Solanke stubbornly retained some foothold in the WASU.

Beyond these internal fissures, external competition was also becoming an increasing threat to the stability of the WASU. An outgrowth of new student hostels and social clubs had developed in order to satisfy the burgeoning demands of new African students. Unlike the WASU, the focus of these new organizations tended either towards the global or the local. As colonized students in London began to raise their voices in a protest that transcended the West African and even the African, the notion of a specifically *West African* anti-colonial strategy became less relevant. Many students preferred to direct their attentions either towards their home colony specifically or towards the greater Pan-African and Afro-Asian movements. Solanke’s original vision of Pan-*West*-African unity, then, was simultaneously eclipsed by larger Pan-African projects and eroded by internal fissures and colonially specific concerns.

¹⁹⁵ School of Oriental and African Studies Special Collections, letter from Solanke to Wellesley Cole, June 25 (1949), PP MS 35.

The project of West African nationalism, however, was not totally abandoned; the development of the West African National Secretariat (WANS) in December 1945 helped to renew the WASU's political vigor.¹⁹⁶ A direct product of the Manchester Pan-African Conference, WANS was founded by Kwame Nkrumah, Wallace Johnson, Kojo Botsio, and a host of other WASU members.¹⁹⁷ The organization, which can be understood as a radical, profoundly Marxist branch of the WASU, "saw itself very much as the vanguard, not only in the struggle for 'absolute independence for all West Africa', but also in the struggle to unite West Africa as 'one country'."¹⁹⁸ While the WASU's vision for a united West Africa had been limited to British territories on the western coast, WANS expanded the imagined nation to include a West African 'Soviet Union' stretching as far east as Kenya and Sudan and encompassing French and Belgian as well as British colonies.¹⁹⁹ Though anomalous in the fact that their focus was specifically West African, the WANS hoped that an independent West Africa could become a "lever with which the whole continent would be freed."²⁰⁰ Working closely with the Communist Party of Great Britain, WANS also developed a small, covert operation known as 'The Circle.'²⁰¹ The goal of this revolutionary organization was to develop a strong body of leaders who could bring WANS' aims to fruition. Though WANS collapsed soon after Nkrumah returned to the Gold Coast in 1947, the organization's nationalist fervor and international ties reinvigorated the WASU's claim to West African nationhood.

¹⁹⁶ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 128-131.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Collaboration with WANS, however, did little to boost the WASU's esteem among British interests. As one official noted, "It is sometimes difficult to appreciate exactly where WASU activities end and the WANS begin."²⁰² Worried that the WASU had been "contaminated by communism," the Colonial Office continued to deny them any official recognition.²⁰³ Because of the WASU's importance as a representative social body, however, the Colonial Office knew that they must tread lightly in order to avoid feeding colonial suspicions around the role and intentions of the British Government. Former colonial secretary William Ormsby-Gore remarked on this problematic positioning, noting, "in addition to being a club and a hostel, WASU is the focus of a good deal of half-baked political activity... It is rather difficult in dealing with WASU to keep separate its social and political functions, and, while encouraging the former, to ignore the latter."²⁰⁴ The Dean of Westminster's Committee also worried that this tendency towards subversive Marxism was 'un-Christian,' and the Colonial Governors, notably Sir Arthur Richards of Nigeria, began to block funding to the WASU. WASU's ongoing political radicalization and ties to WANS, then, were a cause of extreme concern for the British organizations responsible for funding the Union.

Wasu News-Service

Despite ongoing attempts to contain West African student politics, increasingly hostile conditions in West Africa paired with racism and radical cooperation in the metropole actually fueled the nationalist fire. Students continued to use Marxism and

²⁰² The National Archives, CO 537/2638/14322/2.

²⁰³ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 134.

²⁰⁴ The National Archives, inter-office memo, October 16 (1943), CO 554/127/12.

Communism in order to manipulate the conditions of the Cold War and negotiate national independence. The paramount influence of these ideologies during the 1950s is reflected in the changing form and content of the WASU's organ. Founded as *Wasu* magazine, the WASU's main publication was reborn in 1952 as *Wasu News-Service*. *Wasu News-Service*, like its predecessor, concerned itself primarily with WASU and West African affairs. It was also, however, affiliated to the International Union of Students (IUS), a communist organization based out of Prague. The re-branded magazine featured an outwardly Marxist and internationalist perspective, and reported regularly on anti-colonial struggles around the world. *Wasu News-Service* ardently defended nationalist movements like the Mau Mau struggle in Kenya, and decried the government's 'imperialist' attempts to legitimate their position on the matter. During the 1950s, then, the WASU continued and even intensified the use of Marxist and Communist solidarity in their bid for colonial independence.

CONCLUSION

The Christian missionary movement that began in the 15th century and evolved through the establishment of Freetown and the subsequent evangelical expansionism of the 19th and 20th centuries brought not only the European faith but also the Western commercial and cultural paradigm to the kingdoms and villages of West Africa. In the course of this process, the Three C's—namely Christianity, civilization and commerce—became practically synonymous with the forces of Euro-Christian missionary education. Cognizant of the culturally imperialistic connotations of the missions, West Africans adopted the Three C's on their own terms. As the conditions of colonialism became increasingly salient, Christianity, civilization and commerce became popular means of resisting and even subverting colonial oppression. This dynamic continued to influence the lives and activities of 'creolized' West African students who followed their education to England, and often shaped the forms that university-level negotiation of the colonial power system took.

Upon their arrival in Britain, many West African students found themselves alienated and alone within an unfamiliar cultural paradigm. Students reacted to this liminal space of cultural belonging by developing entirely new social collectivities engendered in a syncretic marriage of African and Euro-Christian realities. The West African Students' Union was one such collectivity. Founded in 1925 around the dream of a future West African nation-state, the Union used the Three C's to negotiate the colonial power system as they established themselves as a morally and politically valid body in the eyes of British onlookers. While the WASU began as a relatively conservative organization using Christianity to assimilate to the dominant paradigm, the

social and political events that unfolded between the 1920s and early 1960s fueled their nationalist ideology and pushed them towards “an increasingly radical critique and solution of their problems.”²⁰⁵ Students thus began to *reappropriate* and *subvert* the ideological terms of Christianity, civilization and commerce in order to *erode* the colonial system. These relatively humble beginnings, then, would ultimately help to spell the end to the British Empire.

On March 6, 1957, Ghana became the first West African state to gain its independence. The WASU dedicated an entire issue of *Wasu News-Service* to the celebration of this success, congratulating WASU-alumni-turned-president Kwame Nkrumah and wishing the best for the infant nation. Though certainly an important training grounds for future politicians, then, the WASU played a minimal role in the actual process of decolonization. The real struggle for independence occurred on the ground in West Africa, and as colonial movements became increasingly fragmented and competitive, the WASU, too, was broken apart and reconstituted. While many students remained idealistic advocates of the Pan-West-African vision upon which the WASU had been founded, many others “discarded the mantel of radicalism and communism to return home and secure a lucrative career in government.”²⁰⁶ Students’ dreams of a federal West African nation thus evaporated as ‘otherizing’ colonial forces broke down and the negotiation of sociopolitical advantage assumed a more localized reality.

²⁰⁵ Adi, *West Africans in Britain (1900-1960)*, 76.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

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